33 MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Chicano Controversy

Oscar Acosta and Richard Rodriguez

Paul Guajardo

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New Approaches

Yoshinobu Hakutani
General Editor

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INTRODUCTION

The Root of the Controversy

Oscar Zeta Acosta and Richard Rodriguez introduced much controversy into the Chicano canon by maintaining an uneasy relationship to their heritage, and by calling into question notions of identity, ethnicity, and class. Rodriguez' uniqueness defies simple categorization. He is a journalist, essayist, autobiographer, public intellectual, and television commentator (on PBS' NewsHour with Jim Lehrer). Acosta was a lawyer, writer, Chicano activist, and possibly an opportunist who spent much of his life rejecting his culture (dis-assimilating) and then frantically trying to reclaim it, perhaps unsuccessfully. In the past, some scholars have been too quick to make a place for Acosta in the Chicano canon, and equally quick in attempting to keep Rodriguez out. The work of these two writers, because of its complexity and because it has brought mainstream attention to the field of Chicano letters, deserves a second look.

On the face of it, there seems little in common between Oscar Zeta Acosta and Richard Rodriguez, but their similarities and differences make a particularly fruitful field for discussion because of their concern with identity, ethnicity, and class. Regardless of education, accomplishment, and self-scrutiny, the effects of negative self-view that sometimes plagues minorities–when they come into contact with a majority group that differs markedly in physical appearance–are not easily overcome despite the authors' assertions to the contrary. Acosta and Rodriguez have misled many of their readers. Although they both claim to have become more comfortable with their self-identity, an examination of the texts divulges that their assertions are often contradictory or calculated but not always substantiated nor forthright. Furthermore, in their latter work there are still the same anxieties and concerns which they have supposedly resolved. Acosta and Rodriguez both stress individual autonomy over social identity; they remain fiercely independent, and yet they suffer guilt and anxiety about class and acculturation. These concerns specific to Acosta and Rodriguez bring many questions to the forthcoming discussion. The works of Acosta and Rodriguez portray the controversy that can occur at the crossroads of

cultures.

The similarities and contrasts between these writers are worth noting. Acosta clearly leans toward the political left. Rodriguez, who bills himself as left of center, is continually accused of being in service to the right-wing establishment. Acosta was very much a product of the sixties, and his autobiographical novels depict the lifestyle associated with that era in something of an *expose* or confession. Rodriguez, on the other hand, is more staid, reserved, and seemingly calculating. Acosta's education was relatively modest; he attended Oakdale Joint Union High School, Modesto Junior College, San Francisco State University, and night classes at San Francisco Law School (unaccredited at the time). In contrast, Rodriguez's education was nurtured at prestigious institutions: parochial schools, Stanford, Columbia, Berkeley, Union Theological Seminary, and the Warburg Institute in London. In regard to religion, Rodriguez, who continues to believe the "central tenets of the Church" (*Hunger* 103), has almost been an apologist for traditional Catholicism, even bemoaning the liturgical switch from Latin to English. Notwithstanding, Rodriguez is fascinated by American Protestantism and studied at a theological seminary. Acosta, who was reared Catholic, renounced the faith to become a Baptist and then abandoned religion altogether: "I had at last gotten God off my back" (*Autobiography* 111).

Although both Acosta and Rodriguez are much concerned with the mechanics of writing–with their craft–their writing styles could hardly be more different. Acosta tells a sometimes wild psychedelic hallucinatory tale: a-no-holds-barred account with depictions of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Both of Acosta's autobiographies are in novel form.

On the other hand, Rodriguez is primarily an essayist and journalist. His style is highly restrained, controlled, and polished. Rodriguez offers no eyebrow-raising confessions; in fact his first book does not acknowledge his homosexuality. His text is riddled with omissions. Acosta arranges his works more or less chronologically (if peculiarly), while Rodriguez organizes his around themes. And while Acosta for a time presented himself as a leader of the Chicano movement and relished his role in social uprising, Rodriguez has eschewed taking part in such activities. He has declared that he is not a minority and refused to teach a course on Chicano literature at Berkeley when asked to do so by students.

In light of these striking differences, the similarities are even more

remarkable and deserving of analysis. Both men were sons of Mexican immigrants, born within a dozen years of each other. Their early years were spent within a hundred miles of each other. They both lived in the San Francisco Bay area, and they each wrote two autobiographies or autobiographical works (though as this goes to press in 2002, Rodriguez' third book *Brown* was just published by Viking). They shared similar concerns about self-identity, ethnic-identity, and class. Both writers reject aspects of their cultural identity. Ultimately, Acosta posits himself as a "brown buffalo," choosing his own term of designation, while Rodriguez asserts that his education changed him culturally so that he is not a disadvantaged minority but rather a "middle-class American man. Assimilated" (*Hunger* 3).

The work of both Acosta and Rodriguez contain instances of gazing into a mirror in contemplation of self, yet Acosta and Rodriguez do not see reflected the image most prevalent in society, but instead the "aberrant" image of a minority. Because Acosta and Rodriguez perceive their difference from those in society at large, anxiety occurs. Similarly, Mary Shelley's fictional creation, commonly (but erroneously) referred to as Frankenstein, reflects:

> I admired the perfect forms of my cottagers–their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions; but how I was terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. (Shelley 155)

In their autobiographies, Acosta and Rodriguez share some of these feelings; they claim to desire the closeness of a community, a place to belong, a place without hierarchies of personal beauty–yet they are torn because of their individuality. These two writers also share an eloquence that characterizes Frankenstein's creature. Rodriguez also specifically compares himself with another monstrous literary figure, Shakespeare's Caliban, by acknowledging: "I have taken Caliban's advice. I have stolen their books. I will have some run of this isle" (3). He also asks: "...will this monster make a man?" (3).

In the first chapter of this study, I detail at some length the complicated nature of Chicano identity, a complexity due to Mexico's unique heritage,

a heritage comprised of the European/Spanish and the native/Indian which resulted in a mix, the *mestizo* or modern Mexican. Because of colonization and discrimination, for nearly 500 years, Mexico has suffered from an identity crises: publically they acknowledge and celebrate their indigenous roots, privately they admire the Spanish influence in their blood. These social issues are further complicated when Mexicans immigrate to the United States and rear their children here. Second and third generation Mexican-Americans are usually fully assimilated into the U.S. culture, and yet many retain strong ties to Mexico and the Spanish language. They are in ways *both* Mexican and American, and in ways they are *neither* Mexican nor American.

Another important element to keep in mind, is that the Chicano civil rights movement of the 60s and 70s were working-class movements as evidenced by the United Farm Workers Union strike in Delano California in the mid 1960s. Much of the early literature was a form of social protest.

In the second and third chapters, I detail how Acosta artificially and somewhat opportunistically tried to fit into the Chicano canon by adopting the social protest stance, but attempting to interpret his work through this lens raises far too many questions and provides too few satisfactory answers. We need to carefully evaluate the conclusions that Acosta draws in his works. In *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo,* Acosta claims to have finally found himself (in Ciudad Juarez Mexico). He states that he can now embrace his Chicano identity, but soon after in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, he is again searching for a *raison d'etre*. He is still at odds with his ethnicity, and he still seems to esteem the dominant culture more than his own.

In chapters four and five, I show how Rodriguez overtly avoided identifying with the Chicano movement, daring to criticize Affirmative Action (in its early forms at least) and Bilingual Education. He quickly made himself many enemies within the Chicano/a intellectual community. Virtually every review or article about Rodriguez by minority scholars was negative, while virtually every review or article by mainstream writers was positive. Efforts were made to de-canonize Rodriguez. While lecturing at colleges and universities, Rodriguez was occasionally shouted down. Professors sometimes told their students *not* to attend his lectures. Those who did teach his work did so merely to criticize him, or to establish him as an extreme. There was the belief by some, that Chicano literature must

conform to certain unwritten guidelines. There was also an unspoken feeling that "true" Chicanos must conform to certain nebulous beliefs or policies about identity, language, class, politics, and so forth. In other words, unconsciously or not, many wanted a degree of conformity and unity within the Chicano/a community. While paying lip service to diversity, many actually wanted only one or two narrow kinds of diversity; Rodriguez's diversity was little tolerated. Twenty years after the publication of *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez's voice is less strident, and he seems less of an anomaly. Today, his writing continually focuses on issues of importance to minorities in America, and we are past due for a re-evaluation of his work.

As Hispanics take over the title of *largest minority group*, the questions of identity, class, assimilation, and diversity that Acosta and Rodriguez raise will be even more important.

CHAPTER ONE

Chicanos Are Made Not Born

It is far too easy to say that one is born a certain way, that identity is fixed, and that one cannot change. The reality is far from this. Such essentialist notions of identity are currently out of favor. We now acknowledge that identity is in constant flux. Each of us wear a number of hats; at different times and in different places we each take on a number of roles, identities, *personae*. In spite of efforts to maintain strong cultural ties, all of us are probably quite different culturally from our grandparents.

In reviewing early literature on this topic, David Hayes-Bautista studied two major trends in minority identity formation: assimilation and disassimilation. He argues that minority children increasingly become aware of their ethnic identity, but that there is usually a great deal of assimilation into the dominant culture as they grow; however, at certain points in the lives of some minorities–often in the second or third generation–who are more or less perfectly assimilated, there is a trend toward dis-assimilation, that is the minority decides to revert back to their earlier ethnic identity. There is a trend toward stronger identification with their culture or ethnic group. Hayes-Bautista's *Becoming Chicano: A "Dis-Assimilation" Theory of Transformation of Ethnic Identity* argues that far too many scholars have studied assimilation theories, but few have looked at how some minorities have later dis-assimilated. He mentions Hansen's law of third generation return "...what the father has, the son wishes to forget, but the grandson wishes to remember" (9). These theories are especially important in light of affirmative action which in some ways rewards minority identification. In discussing ethnic identification, Hayes-Bautista outlines something called "muting of properties" a term that especially applies to both Acosta and Rodriguez, but differently. It is sometimes called "passing," and it can be a form of posturing or hiding. This is sometimes accompanied by a "reconstruction of personal history," a trend especially tempting to an autobiographical writer, no doubt. This can be accomplished through omitting (hiding facts), exaggerating (white lies), misleading, posturing, etc.

Another theorist, Joseph Harris, argues that structuralist and post-structuralist notions of self present identity as something of a linguistic construct: an idea that may be supported by the autobiographical work of Acosta and Rodriguez. In Harris' words:

> What is really happening is that one idea of the self is being exchanged for another...The self is seen not *merely* as a single simple essence, but as an incredibly rich and layered tapestry of languages we constantly weave and re-weave. The task of writers is not to make language adhere to some mystic and wordless vision of their selves, but to use language in a way that begins to constitute a self. ("The Plural Text" 162)

Rodriguez in particular is self-conscious in his use of language, as a writer and as something of a bilingual individual (at least during his youth). Within the work of Acosta and Rodriguez the connections between writing and identity are apparent. Both write to inscribe themselves, their lives, by recording part of their history. They assert their individuality, their separateness, their constructed identity to those who may wish to circumscribe them within the confines of a larger group. Acosta and Rodriguez continually assert a sense of separation from the fold, an egregious distancing of themselves, a refusal to acknowledge themselves as part of the minority group. Rodriguez is transformed from *Ricardo* to Richard; Oscar Acosta becomes Zeta, and Buffalo Z. Brown. Both writers choose identities, both adopt new names and a hope for a new place in society.

Psychologist Jean Phinney has also studied the formation of ethnic identity in adolescents. Among "white" youths ethnicity was *not* a significant concept. Phinney further determined that during a "conformity" stage, "...individuals show a preference for the cultural values of the dominant group over those of their own culture. Individuals who do acknowledge their distinguishing physical and/or cultural characteristics view them as a source of shame" (*Ethnic Identity*, 67-8). This sense of shame is evident in the autobiographical works under consideration here. Phinney's research demonstrated that among minorities identity often lies dormant until an event, turning point, or crucial moment initiates a search for ethnic identity. In *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* this moment, this cultural event, is highlighted by Acosta. These epiphanic moments should serve to marshal "...resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (69). At some point a plateau should be reached where

"...tension, emotionality, and defensiveness are replaced by a calm, secure demeanor" (71). In other words ethnic individuals, those with a bicultural identity, should reach a point where anxiety about self-identity gives way to a positive self-concept, a feeling of being at home with oneself.

Unfortunately there is little convincing evidence that this stage is ever reached by Acosta and Rodriguez who have internalized negative stereotypes and consequently seem to write to show they are worthy of society's esteem. Another psychologist, Gerardo Marin, writes that "As individuals acculturate, a number of behaviors are modified, together with their attitudes, beliefs, and values" (*Ethnic Identity* 183). Behaviors are often modified to the extent that external stimuli play a role: peer pressure, prejudice, educational opportunities, economic realities, and geographical settings.

Formation of Chicano Identity

A major portion of the controversial nature of the writings of Acosta and Rodriguez deal with their views of themselves–their identity outside and within the Chicano community. This is partially a function of the long and complicated Mexican-American case history. In *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans*, Alan Riding describes a quiet square in the middle of Mexico City where a 16th century Spanish church looks upon the remains of pre-Colombian (or pre-Cortez, as it were) pyramids. This place is named Plaza of Three Culture, and the plaque reads: "On August 13, 1521 ...Tlatelolco fell into the hands of Hernan Cortes. It was neither triumph nor a defeat: it was the painful birth of the *mestizo* nation..." Riding adds that, nevertheless,

> ...the birth pains...are not over. More than 460 years [later] neither the triumph of Cortes nor the defeat of Cuauhtemoc has been properly assimilated ... [As] individuals [Mexicans] remain trapped by the contradictions of their own parentage. They are the sons of both Cortes and Cuauhtemoc, yet they are neither Spanish nor Indian. They are *mestizos*, but they cannot accept their *mestizaje*... [It] is in both the clash and fusion of these roots that the complexity of Mexico resides. (3-4)

This complexity, this union of the European and the Indian, carries over

and permeates notions of Chicano identity even today.

Mexicans have been termed "Malinche's progeny": the offspring of Spanish *conquistadores* and indigenous women, for there were no Spanish women that came in the early stages of colonization. The Mexican is thus a mixture, *mestizo*, of two very different groups–the European, the other native. The natives, and later *mestizos*, always far outnumbered the Spanish. Riding believes that a key to the complicated Mexican psyche,

> ...lies in the past, a deep subconscious past that stays alive in Mexicans today...Mexicans must conciliate being conquered and conqueror, retaining many of the racial characteristics and personality traits of the Indians and even glorifying their pre-Hispanic heritage, while speaking Spanish, practicing Catholicism and thinking of Spain as the mother country. (4)

Within Mexico there are nationalists who decry everything Spanish as the legacy of imperialism, and there are others, proud of their European heritage, who have nothing but disdain for the Indian. Riding discusses the debates about who was more barbarous, less civilized, the Spanish with their conquests and inquisitions, or the Aztecs with their human sacrifices. From which of these genetic lines did corruption enter the picture?

The fallacy however is in assuming there is something pure about Spain or any other country for that matter. Tracing history, we find that Spaniards were already mixed. Historians note that Spain was under partial African/Moorish/Arab/Muslim domination in the year 711 when Tariq crossed the strait of Gibraltar and proceeded onto the Iberian peninsula with 12,000 Muslim soldiers, introducing an influence that was to last, at least in part, until 1492 (Abercrombie). Most of these soldiers, who brought no women with them, intermarried with Spanish, Visigoth, and Galacian women. In "When the Moors Ruled Spain," Abercrombie quotes a Spaniard as saying:

> We take pride in our *sangre pura*, pure blood. No Catholic wants to face the thought of Moors on the family tree...But we are finding that ... what we think of as "pure Spanish," our architecture, our temperament, our poetry and music–even our language–is a blend from a long Arabic heritage. (92)

Spain's history is not unique in these matters, for ultimately, most if not all, groups have had similar intermingling which calls into question the notion of pure blood; England or any other country is no exception to this rule.

Mexico's history follows a similar pattern, for over the centuries there were various influential indigenous groups rather than a monolithic culture. The Olmecs, Mayas, Chichimecas, Toltecs, and Aztecs are some of the early major groups, but the Zapotecs, Totanacs, Pipils, Otomis, and Mixtecs, among many others, also exerted varying degrees of influence whether genetic or cultural. Ethnographers and anthropologists, suggest that only about ten percent of the genetic influence in Mexico is Spanish or European (see e.g. Forbes, 151).

The Mexican is however a little different from other "mixed" people because of the great differences in the two contributing factors. It may be argued that those with European ancestry do not enjoy/suffer such keen differences. Many scholars and historians, along with James Vigil, have noted that the great majority of first generation *mestizos* were the "... bastard offspring of Spanish men and Indian women" (83). These children were accepted by neither the Spaniards nor the Indians. In a similar parallel today, some Chicano/as feel accepted by neither their adopted country nor the mother country. As bicultural persons, Chicano/as, in an unusual way, become persons without a country. Manuel Ramirez defines a "bicultural person" as someone

> ...caught between the...demands of two cultures. Because of his inability to comply with the requirements of both groups, the bicultural individual often fails to identify with either... His conflicting values give him an uncomfortable sense of insecurity, instability, and disorientation. He usually attempts to resolve the conflict by choosing one group and rejecting the other. (57)

But it is not simply a matter of choosing or privileging one group over another, for major cultural differences separate the groups. Ramirez has compiled a "Mexican Family Attitude Scale" which measures some of the many differences between Anglos and Mexicans. According to him, Mexicans generally prize such things as: loyalty to the family group; relatives over friends; respect for adults; strict childbearing practices; mother as the most revered person; a present-time orientation; and a willingness to defend one's honor (58). Other studies conclude that in comparison to Anglo-American families, Mexican-Americans enjoy:

> ...closer relations and greater loyalty among members, more frequent visitations of relative...family-centered orientations in...children, fewer opportunities for children to bring friends over... less freedom for children to play away from home,

> greater disapproval for children contradicting authority, and fewer decision-making opportunities for the children. (*Ethnic Identity* 217)

Others, including Riding, have attempted to understand such "cultural" peculiarities as the siesta, the *manana* attitude, corruption, fatalism, etc.

Within the Anglo-American culture the focus, and priority, is often different, almost opposite. In general the protestant work-ethic prizes: individuality, freedom, independence, competition, ambition, assertiveness, success, materialism, responsibility, logic, the scientific method, and self-reliance. Even aggression may be more highly prized than in some Latin American/Native American cultures.

The issue of race and social class is still a delicate topic in modern-day Mexico. Because of their bifurcated ancestry, Mexicans, perhaps more than most, are obsessed with notions of heritage, lineage, and genealogy. This extreme concern is presented by Vigil as he attempts to schematize the possible pairings:

1. Spaniard and Indian beget *mestizo*.
2. *Mestizo* and Spanish woman beget *castizo*.
3. *Castizo* woman and Spaniard beget Spaniard.
4. Spanish woman and African slave beget mulatto.
5. Spaniard and mulatto woman beget *morisco*.
6. *Morisco* woman and Spaniard beget *albino*.
7. Spaniard and albino woman beget *torna atras*. (174)

More than anything this over-simplified (not to say erroneous) schema shows not only the complexity and the heterogeneity of Mexican culture, but also the obsessive ethnic and racial concerns implied by the detailed categories which underscore the importance of skin color even in Mexico with its diverse cultures. When these pairings develop, a hierarchy surfaces: one group is privileged over another. One group enjoys status, the other is relegated to the margins. Although it goes without saying, the Spanish influence is prized; the Indian element is disparaged. These hierarchical and ethnic concerns among Mexicans and Mexican Americans are highlighted in the writing of Acosta and Rodriguez–both of whom are much concerned with skin-color and class.

Like many other groups, modern-day Mexicans, are a curious amalgam of temperaments, cultures, world views, and even religions. And when Mexicans come in contact with Anglo-Americans–because of, say,

immigration–other complicating factors are thrown into the equation. Mexican-Americans are not an easily defined entity. Some trace their heritage in the southwest since before the Anglo-American migration, since before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Our country is filled with Spanish place-names, and many in New Mexico, for example, consider themselves "pure" Spanish since they did not come by way of Mexico. Some Mexicans became *de facto* U.S. citizens in 1848 without ever immigrating to this country. On the other hand, some Mexican Americans have become so assimilated that they neither speak Spanish nor reflect any Mexican cultural norms. These individuals are sometimes referred to as *agringados* (Anglicized). Other Mexican-Americans are undocumented workers or "illegal aliens" who may speak no English and who are sometimes derisively referred to as being *atrasados*, or backward. Between these extremes there are myriad variations and outlooks. Some have come looking for economic opportunity and consider the U.S. something of a promised land; others yearn for a pre-Guadalupe Hidalgo era without Anglo-American governance or oppression (if only psychological).

Historian Jack Forbes argues that many of the early problems related to Mexican-American identity surfaced because all "...too often scholars and social workers dealing with Mexican-Americans have ignored the Americanoid racial characteristics of the latter and have instead regarded them as simply another European minority group..." (150), although the opposite sometimes holds true as well. Forbes lists five reasons for his view:

> (1) The European conquest of Mexico implanted the notion of Caucasian superiority; (2) Anglo-American color prejudice reinforced the above tendency and caused lighter-skinned Mexicans...to deny any non-Caucasian ancestry; (3) Mexican-Americans have often sought to avoid being associated with blacks (as "colored" people), to avoid having to submit to discriminatory practices aimed at the latter; (4) similarly, being "white" has served to protect Mexicans from being lumped together with tribal Americans and thus subject to discriminatory practices aimed at the latter; (5) many Anglo-Americans, not wishing to "offend" the more sensitive Mexican-Americans, have aided in fostering the Spanish and white myths. (151)

Consider also the U.S. government's puzzlement when faced with such a group. The politically correct terminology for minorities changes often. Within the Black community, for example, references have included, at one

time or another: Negro, Colored, African-American, Afro-American, and Black. The current preference for Americans of Mexican descent is "Hispanic" because of its catch-all nature–the inhabitant or descendent of any Latin American country with distant ties to Spain. Latino, another favorite, has a similar broad range. Official government forms have in the past used the designations: "Spanish surname," "Spanish speaking," "Spanish American," "Mexican American," "Hispanic," "Latino," and more recently "Chicano/a." These changes in terms, combined with an increasing trend toward acronyms, have led Chicano comedy troupe "Culture Clash" to, suggest a new term/organization called MOCOS–*Mexican or Chicano or Something*. In Spanish *mocos* means something like boogers, thus the humor. Though humorous, this term captures the difficulties of finding a term that pleases everyone and does not offend, but in the case of Mexican Americans, no such term exists.

William Nericcio and Juan Bruce-Novoa have both discussed the hyphen in "Mexican-American" as an important feature of identity. Bruce-Novoa has dedicated part of his literary career exploring the possibilities delineated by the hyphen. In "The Space of Chicano Literature," he notes the predominance of both the Mexican and American influence,

> ...yet, we are neither, as we are not Mexican-American. I propose that we are the space (not the hyphen) between the two, the intercultural nothing of that space. We are continually expanding that space, pushing the two out and apart as we build our own separate reality.... (27-28)

In a different but equally important discussion, Nericcio writes that,

> The hyphen in the name "Mexican-American" serves, in effect, both as a symbol of the bridges that span the nations of the United States and Mexico and, also, a minus sign (-) symbolizing the negation of the peoples forming the culture around that very boundary. (169)

Similarly, in *The Daughter's Seduction*, Jane Gallop reflects on the status of a hyphenated name:

> The hyphen can be read as the Lacanian bar that afflicts the speaking subject, splits the subject, divides the signifier from the signified. It can also be read as a minus sign, the sign of a lack, a castration. The two terms are not added, forming a union, but are subtracted. (quoted in Nericcio 169)

When confronted by a hyphenated American, Nericcio notes that there is something of a desire for self-mutilation: "...neither a Mexican nor an American and something less than both fused together. One cannot just write it off as 'word play' as idle nonsense or linguistic fetishism..." (169). The dual status of the Mexican American suggests illegitimacy, the "...inter-contaminated offspring of the border's two extremes. Mexico and the United States do not cancel each other out, rather a new element forms out of their forced combination" (169). The new element, however, is often undesirable. The hyphen presupposes a sense of alienated identity. The hyphen, according to Nericcio, is the bridge between the two countries, between the two lands, worlds apart. This river demarking the border "... figures as the site where the contradictions of two cultures collide in a union which forms the 'fractured identity' of Mexican-Americans" (170). At this juncture a new element exists: one that is part of neither world and part of both worlds; this individual becomes a Chicano/a in search of identity and place.

Traditionally, the road to minority success in the United States has been one of assimilation, of adopting consciously or unconsciously the ways of the dominant culture while sloughing off the customs of the mother-country. But assimilationist tendencies have more recently been criticized by those who believe that minorities should maintain their culture and language to whatever extent possible. This idea, however, presents a philosophical problem. What if minorities *want* to assimilate? Who is to decide they should maintain strong cultural roots? What about minorities who immigrate precisely to escape repressive cultural/social customs in their home-land? Should Mexican males maintain *machista* characteristics because they may be acceptable (or even encouraged) in Mexico, or should they assimilate? Should immigrant Mexican women consider their primary responsibility to rear children and be homemakers, since that was once prized in Mexico, or should they assimilate? Who could possibly determine what constitutes positive cultural diversity and what constitutes undesirable cultural diversity? Assimilation therefore is not necessarily negative, and in some ways is nearly essential. Nevertheless, Acosta can be, and Rodriguez certainly is, soundly criticized for assimilating.

Nicholasa Mohr, although Puerto Rican, acknowledges the assimilationist view in harmony with the experience of many Mexican-Americans, that one must not only embrace Anglo-American culture,

> ...but also to reject one's own Hispanic culture. Participation in the greater society at large meant abandoning the *barrio*. This attempt at assimilation...this frustrating struggle to fit in, was encouraged...the price of this success, was paid by discarding our own history and never seeking the truth of our past. Anglo-American values demanded that we had to reject our parent's language, and change our way of thinking. Even our clothes and food were seen as foreign. Going as far as changing one's name from Rivera to Rivers wasn't such a bad idea either.... (81)

Because of not-so-subtle assimilation pressure some minorities still function as members of a psychologically colonized group. Juan Rodriguez devotes an article, "La busqueda de identidad y sus motivos en la literatura chicana," to the minority's search for identity and to the rejection of culture that occurs in some of the literature. But in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors writes that "Assimilation is the foe of ethnicity" (xiv). Early works like Jose Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* and *Clemente Chacon* support this thesis.

Within the borders of the United States, people of Mexican heritage have chosen various ways of dealing with their adopted culture. Mexican poet and essayist, Octavio Paz, has written about the U.S. *pachucos* in a book about the Mexican Psyche. It is unusual for a book about Mexicans to begin with a discussion of Mexican-Americans, but this beginning illustrates the significance of the topic. While in Los Angeles, Paz noted some differences between the cultures. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, he writes that the Mexicans in L.A. love "...decoration, carelessness and pomp, negligence, passion and reserve–floats in the air...because it never mixes or unites with the other world, the North American world based on precision and efficiency" (13). According to Paz, the Mexican and the North American attitudes are irreconcilable. His criticism is aimed at North American culture, a society that, to use his example, imprisons an individual "...like a plant in a flower-pot too small for it: he cannot grow or mature" (25). And while the specific comparisons may be dated or overly simplified, Paz points out differences in general temperament between the two cultures. These differences lead to other concerns. Paz goes on to suggest that some Mexicans in the United States: "...feel ashamed of their origin...they act like persons who are wearing disguises, who are afraid of a stranger's look because it could strip them and leave them stark naked...This spiritual condition, or lack of a spirit has given

birth to a type known as the *pachuco*" (13). *Pachucos*, and some Mexican-Americans generally, deal with this difference through a form of rebellion. Because of inferiority complexes, according to Paz, these individuals adopt disguises or masks with which to meet the world. Acosta, comes to mind.

Aware that I am being repetitive, Mexican-Americans are neither Mexicans nor Anglo-Americans. Juan Bruce-Novoa has pointed out that hyphenated Americans inhabit the space between the terms but not either of the terms. Mexican-Americans forge new ground and new identities, as does their literature.

Paz indicates the complexity of this dual nature: "The *pachuco* does not want to become Mexican again; [but] at the same time he does not want to blend into the life of North America" (14). Paz writes that *pachucos* deny "...both the society from which [they] originate and that of North America" (17). Although Paz maintains that a *pachuco* does "...not want to become either a Mexican or a Yankee" (18)–what he refers to as two irreducible worlds–*pachucos cannot* become either; they have little choice in the matter, so the point is moot. Mexican-Americans will stand out and apart from the dominant culture which often rejects them, sometimes subtly sometimes not. Paz draws a pessimistic conclusion about these individuals: "The *pachuco* has lost his whole inheritance: language, religion, customs, beliefs. He is left with only a body and a soul with which to confront the elements, defenseless against the stares of everyone"(15). Paz is quick to add that this sense of difference is just that, difference, not inferiority–an important distinction, but one not always supported in the literature.

Other, more extreme, ways of dealing with difference are also in a mildly autobiographical novel by Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A black character, Mrs. Turner, characterizes the extent to which identity denial can be carried. Turner provides an interesting and important perspective on minority identity. Hurston writes that:

> Mrs. Turner's shape and features were entirely approved by Mrs. Turner. Her nose was slightly pointed and she was proud. Her thin lips were an ever delight to her eyes. Even her buttocks in bas-relief were a source of pride. To her way of thinking all these things set her aside from Negroes....
>
> "Ah can't stand black niggers. Ah don't blame de white folks for hatin' 'em 'cause Ah can't stand 'em mahself...Us oughta class off...Who wants to be mixed up wid uh rusty black man, and uh black woman goin' down de street in all dem loud colors, and whoopin' and hollerin' and laughin' oer nothing'? ...Don't bring me no nigger doctor tuh hang over mah sick-bed...White doctors always gits my

> money. Ah don't go in no nigger store tuh buy nothin' neither. Colored folks don't know nothin' 'bout no business...." (136)

Although extreme, this is not an isolated case. This denial of identity is a painful example of the degree to which the minds of minorities can be colonized. Turner has been so inculcated in the dominant culture that she has come to loath her own race.

Concerns about minorities and identity are not as simple as black and brown and white; subtle nuances are missed by outsiders. Such careful distinctions are humorously presented in a much overlooked novel by Richard Bradford, *Red Sky at Morning*. Josh Arnold has just moved to Sagrado, New Mexico from Mobile, Alabama, and his new friend Steenie is explaining the social/ethnic classes:

> "We don't want racial trouble out here. [So] don't call him a Negro. He thinks he's an Anglo. We only recognize three kinds of people in Sagrado: Anglos, Indians, and Natives. You keep your categories straight and you'll make out all right...Now, you see that girl over there...what would you say she was?"
>
> "She looks like a Creole."
>
> "...She's a Native. Her name's Viola Lopez. She speaks Spanish and English...Don't ever make the mistake of calling her a Mexican...Of course, if you call her a Creole she'll get confused as hell and think you mean she's part Negro–that is, part dark-skinned Anglo–and her brother will kill you again. So think of her as a Native, unless you're comparing her with an Indian, then she's 'white.' Got it?"
>
> "I think so," [Arnold] said, "but what about the Negro?"
>
> "I already explained that to you. He's an Anglo. That is, he's an Anglo unless you're differentiating between him and an Indian. Then he's 'white.' I admit he's awfully dark to be white, but that's the way it goes around here...If there's a minority group at all around here, it's the Anglos." (32-33)

Although intended to be humorous, we see from this example how complicated the question of ethnicity can seem, and how it is often complicated by issues of class. The notion of status and skin color are relative. The three categories in Arnold's new world correspond somewhat to the three kinds of people Acosta knew growing up: Whites, Okies, and Mexicans. In Steenie's New Mexico, a Black person has more status than an Indian and was considered "white" in certain contexts, because Blacks do not fit into any of the major categories (White, Spanish, or Indian) that prevail in New Mexico. And, ironically, this *milieu* has no room for the term "Mexican" because that term implies a mixture, a *mestizaje*, which

people of Spanish descent in New Mexico do not always wish to acknowledge. In Steenie's world, Mexicans do not exist; there are Indians, and there are Spaniards, but any mixture between the groups either lowers the status of the Spaniard or raises the status of the Indian, neither of which is acceptable to the "Spanish" New Mexican, so the mixture is denied.

A few Mexican-Americans suffer from a poor self-image that is garnered from their experiences in the world; that is, they become subjected to the discrimination and prejudices of others, and so their attitudes are learned. Acosta and Rodriguez recount the taunts and jeers leveled at them. But there is also a long history of racism that is sometimes subtly and not so subtly passed down by parents and others. Arnoldo De Leon is just one of many historians who has chronicled this negative legacy. Mexican Americans can give a long list of opprobriums that have been used against them: greaser, wetback, meskin, spic, beaner, pepper-belly, cholo, and we should remember that even "Chicano" was once, and to some still is, disparaging. Historically, Mexicans were deemed biologically inferior. The Puritans did not intermix with the natives and thus remained apart and supposedly "pure," while the Spanish Conquistadores did mix with the indigenous women of Mexico. Others have regarded Mexicans as morally inferior because their religious views were considered in opposition to the more Puritan and Protestant ethic among the Anglo-American sector. De Leon notes that "In the Anglo view, Mexicans did not understand their own religion and thought adherence to it consisted mostly of reciting prayers" (13). Strangely, these, and other, stereotypes still surface sometimes. The prevalent image of the Mexican is a *peon* wearing a *serape* and *sombrero* reclining against a saguaro cactus while a *burro* is tethered in the background. Although this image comes from an earlier era, it has been indelibly etched into the minds of many. It is still often thought that Mexicans are lazy, have a mañana attitude, are adept at the use of knives, take long *siestas* in the afternoon, are corrupt, are passive (but also have fiery tempers when provoked), have a thirst for blood (because of the Aztec influence), are overly romantic (Latin lovers) or emotional, live for the *fiesta* (*que viva* Mexico!), wear big *sombreros* and *guayaberas*, ride donkeys, are uneducated, have a dozen children, live in *jacales* (thatched huts), and when able to speak English do so with a thick accent. In this country, they are also assumed to be welfare recipients. These images were promulgated in literature and by the media which promoted such characters

as the "*frito bandido*," "speedy Gonzales" and other fictions. The more recent stereotype–the new improved version–is of the Latino drug dealer and criminal. Historian Arthur Pettit, has documented four stereotypical images of Mexican-Americans that prevail in film and fiction.

> (1) The harassed victims who retreat passively from the [Anglo] American enemy, only to be apprehended and sacrificed...(2)...the light-skinned, Americanized Mexicans who manage to 'make it' in Anglo-American society. (3)...the dark avengers who set out to cripple and wound the American oppressor. And finally (4) there are the jolly loafers who accept their miserable lot with little bitterness or recrimination. (177)

The main reason for these stereotypes is prejudice and ignorance, but a more subtle reason for these views is that many of the Mexican immigrants who did come to this country were those who were already disenfranchised in Mexico. Many of the more prosperous and better-educated had fewer or no reasons to leave Mexico during the revolutions. Many Anglo-Americans have assumed that the poor Mexican immigrant day-laborer is a representative specimen of all Mexicans. Furthermore, the language barrier that often surfaces advances the idea that these immigrants are ignorant because they are sometimes unable to express themselves well in English. When Rodriguez's father, in halting English, attempts to speak to a gas station attendant, Rodriguez is ashamed. Increasingly the father senses this and ultimately concedes his public voice to his wife: that is, he refuses to speak English in public unless absolutely necessary.

Part of the impetus for the assimilation process occurs because Mexican-Americans soon learn that they are indeed a minority; they do not represent the dominant group. Rene Girard provides a useful theoretical framework for the discussion of "self" and "other"–minority and majority. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, he shows how subjects (whether, minorities or otherwise) tend to surrender their desire to the model provided for them in society. Subjects can thus succumb to the dominant cultural paradigm even when it is at odds with their own identity: Hurston's character, Mrs. Turner, is a perfect example. Desire can thus be insidious, for though we might imagine that our desire comes from within ourselves, it is often molded, if not actually created, by society. Desire, then, according to Girard, is not spontaneously produced from within but mediated by some other external force. Advertizing is a particularly

insidious force for change, and each day minorities see images in print or on the television that tell them what they should desire, how they should look, and what they should be.

CHAPTER TWO

The Autobiographical Impulse

"Who am I? What am I?" At some point in our lives we begin to wonder about our origins, our relationship to our family, and our place in society. As we age, often there is increased interest in the past and in our ancestors. Furthermore, as we become older, there is sometimes the desire to inscribe our life via an autobiography. An autobiography can be a small attempt at immortality–leaving a record of our life for posterity. It is somewhat unusual that Acosta and Rodriguez both wrote two autobiographies and as relatively young men.

The writings of Acosta and Rodriguez are particularly controversial because of their autobiographical nature which insists on, at least partial, realism. Although Philippe Lejeune, a leading theorist on the subject, questions whether autobiography can be defined because of the wide divergences within the genre, myriad definitions of "auto-bio-graphy" (Gusdorf) have been given along with much debate and disagreement in various scholarly works. For our purpose here, it is sufficient to say that autobiographies, though varied, are generally retrospective personal accounts of authors recording parts of their own lives while using their own names: in other words a self (auto), writing (graphy), his or her life (bios). Lejeune, in his definition (continually changing), stresses that autobiographies are oriented toward prose, are temporally organized, and depict psychological concerns. No single definition, however, fully encompasses the great variety within the term or genre. Not all scholars accept autobiography as a legitimate genre because of its extraordinary scope. One such point of view is presented by Paul de Man who believes that autobiographies do not lend themselves well to "generic definition." De Mann's often quoted statement, that any book with a readable title page is somewhat autobiographical, may seem slightly facetious, but it is no less true than the converse of this statement, that all autobiographies are at least partly fictional: sometimes intentional and acknowledged, sometimes not.

At some point, most humans consider their life retrospectively. Nevertheless, despite James Olney's playful comment that "...recent publishing

history offers plentiful evidence that [autobiography] is practiced by almost everyone" (*Autobiography* 3), few heed the autobiographical impulse. Autobiography has been referred to as the "most delightful of all reading" (William Dean Howells), as "the most entrancing of books" (Bonamy Dobree), as a genre having "no substitute or rival" (Pascal), as "the most popular form of fiction for modern readers" (Conway), and as "the dark continent of literature" (Stephen Shapiro). In a discussion of Chicano/a autobiography, Julian Olivares presents autobiography as having "become a unique American genre" ("From the Editor" 10).

Minority writers may record personal history out of a wish to preserve a vanishing culture or way of life, out of a desire to leave a record for the younger more-assimilated generation, or out of a need to come to terms with the self, particularly the ethnic-minority self. The strength of autobiography lies in its providing "...privileged access to an experience ...that no other variety of writing can offer...autobiography renders in a peculiarly direct and faithful way the experience and the vision of a people" (Olney *Autobiography* 13). Because of the unique, and presumably authentic, approach and insight that autobiographies can provide, these works are enjoying yet another renaissance, a resurgence of popularity. This new interest in the genre may have been sparked in part by the growing interests in such things as ethnic foods, clothing, curios, music, art, cultural icons, and travel abroad. Witness the popularity of salsa (outselling ketchup), tortillas (several billion sold each year), and the proliferation of Mexican restaurants, as just three of many examples. Even Hollywood and the music industry are finally trying to cash-in on things Latino. Consider, for example, the growing popularity of Edward James Olmos (now a Hollywood staple), Jennifer Lopez, Salma Heyek, Freddy Prince, Jr., Ricky Martin, Antonio Banderas, and Christina Aguilera among many others. Tom Cruise is now dating Penelope Cruz. Some years ago, during a public lecture, Genaro Padilla, in partial jest, announced that *cilantro* was yuppie vegetable-of-the-year. There is now a sport-utility vehicle called the Aztec. The natural extension of this interest is to more carefully examine the literature and in particular the autobiographical literature by minorities.

Often, minorities write out of a desire to come to a greater understanding of self and to answer the standard question: "who am I?" It is no surprise then that much of the early literature published by Mexican-Americans was autobiographical, for this genre lends itself well to those

concerns. Olney notes this phenomena among Black writers who "...entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography. From Fredrick Douglass to Malcolm X, from Olaudah Equiano to Maya Angelou, the mode specific to the black [and Chicano] experience has been autobiography..." (*Autobiography* 15). The autobiographies and coming-of-age stories by Mexican-Americans, often depict the life of migrant workers struggling to gain an economic toe-hold in a society dominated by Anglo-Americans, or the life of a young Mexican-American growing up in a rural area. In the last two decades, however, there has been more variety and experimentation, including several gang-memoirs. Pascal feels that "Most autobiographers succeed better with their childhood than their later life, even their youth," (84) and this is corroborated by some of the more popular literary works, by (or about) Mexican-Americans, that detail what it is to grow up as a minority in America: *Pocho, Bless Me, Ultima, ... y no se lo trago la tierra, The House on Mango Street, Hoyt Street, Famous All Over Town* among many others. Although obvious, it is necessary to remember that (usually) children do not write autobiographies; it is always an *adult* looking back, whether in the voice of a child or an adult. Consider the short list of works just mentioned; most adopt the voice of a child in at least part of the narrative. In writing their life stories, Mexican- Americans have at some point used all of the possible approaches to this genre, including memoirs, journals, diaries, essays, poetry, biography, and novel.

To best understand Mexican-American literature–since so much of it is autobiographical–it is essential to take a close look at the few autobiographies that are available, which is the impetus for this work. Nevertheless, while much of the early literature is autobiographical, little of it is actually written as autobiography, and work in this genre by women has been, until recently, particularly lacking. Acosta and Rodriguez, along with Anthony Quinn more recently, are among the few Mexican-Americans who have actually written two autobiographical works which Pascal notes is a rarity (the writing of two), and which, we might add, may be a little presumptuous: implying either that the first work was premature, or that there is more than a little egocentricity involved.

The impulse to record one's life takes many forms. Nericcio, and others, have made a case suggesting that for Mexican-American writers in particular, "...the art of narration plays a fundamental role in the development of an identity..." (165). This narration specifically takes the form of

"the autobiographical voice" (165). Nericcio argues that the writing of autobiographies becomes a vehicle for the quest of identity. "Chicano autobiography and novels utilizing the autobiographical mode render into words the collective Mexican-American quest for identity" (173). In Chicano autobiography, Nericcio writes, the voice that predominates is the "I" even though the writer may not have a clear sense of "who that 'I' is" (166). The writing then is not just the recording of a life but a search for the individual to whom that life belongs. Autobiographical writing can become a search and a quest. For Nericcio there is another function that writing an autobiography serves, that is, gaining "access to the realm of power" (174). Alma Gomez is taught that "...once you discover words you discover your history...." (quoted in Nericcio 174). Nericcio suggests that once one can conceptualize the world one can transform it, and by transforming it, gain greater access to it.

Other reasons that the autobiographical mode is one of the most popular starting points for minority writers may be, as Olney states, that "Autobiography is both the simplest of literary enterprises and the commonest. Anybody who can write a sentence or even speak into a tape recorder or to a ghostwriter can do it" (*Autobiography* 3). As an aside, we know that *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was written by Gertrude Stein; Malcolm X's autobiography was written by Alex Haley; *testimonios* by Mexican immigrants have been written by field workers in sociology and other disciplines. Chris Strachwitz and James Nicolopulos co-wrote *Lydia Mendoza: A Family Autobiography. Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruiz* was penned by a professional journalist. In any case, although Olney seems to simplify the difficulties of writing an autobiography, his comment nevertheless rings true and is also supported by the number of minority autobiographical works in various forms. According to Olney, "In addition to being the simplest and commonest of writing propositions, autobiography is also the least "literary" kind of writing, practiced by people who would neither imagine nor admit that they were 'writers'" (*Autobiography* 4). Many, if not most, of the early Chicano/a writers and autobiographers were not professional writers or academics; they did not write for a living. Olney asserts that autobiography "...exercises something like a fatal attraction for nearly all men and women who would call themselves 'writers'" (4). Because one's life is usually what one knows best, and since each life is a markedly different experience from every other

life, the recording or inscribing of one's life is, for many aspiring minority writers, the logical starting point.

From the reader's point of view, the attraction with autobiographies is supplied in part by the ability to enter–at least partially and for a time–someone else's life: someone's life remarkably different from our own to provide contrast and experience, or someone's life which may be from a similar background in order to relate and empathize. Furthermore, autobiographies can, and do, provide an outsider with entrance into any possible world: historical, psychological, social, cultural, political, philosophical, economic, and literary.

In *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Roy Pascal attributes some of the autobiographical fascination to the ability provided to the reader "...to hear of the small circumstances of private and social life, of emotional involvements, prejudices and passions, beliefs and convictions, that are normally each man's secret" (1). Moreover, these works can offer "... unparalleled insight into the mode of consciousness of other men" (1).

In his review of the history and theory of autobiography, James Olney delineates three naive assumptions, or myths that surround this genre. One is that autobiographies can only "signify 'the course of a lifetime' or at least a significant portion of a lifetime" (20). Another myth is that autobiographies present the objective history of an internal subject within an external world, and finally, that autobiographies are unproblematic, that there are "no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self deception" (20). This last category in particular will be addressed in regard to Acosta and Rodriguez, for that is a major concern of these and other minority writers and autobiographers. From their work, we must conclude that autobiography can and does raise "...agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, [and] self deception" (20).

In a forward to *On Autobiography* by Philippe Lejeune, Paul Eakin summarizes one of Lejeune's points: "...the autobiographical pact is a form of contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life" (ix). Lejeune's concern is the relationship between biography and autobiography and between autobiography and fiction. He presents autobiographies as a "special kind of fiction" (ix), accusations that have been aimed at both Acosta and Rodriguez, but, it

must be added, accusations which can be leveled at nearly any autobiographer. With this in mind Lejeune suggests that an autobiography ought to have "verifiable biographical reality" to some extent. Thus for him, as Eakin notes, sincerity is both the *sine qua non* of autobiography and also a "sterile problematic" (ix) to be avoided. Although aware of the limitations of any definition, Lejeune offers this one: an autobiography is a "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (*On Autobiography* 4). Notice that the last sentence is somewhat limiting because of the focus on personality.

To reduce Pascal's thesis in *Design and Truth in Autobiography* to a single sentence–design and truth are generally mutually exclusive. By design he means something akin to imposed structure–an idea which Lawrence Sterne exploits in the eighteenth century by pretending to depict the complete/exact/literal life of Tristram Shandy. Sterne shows the convoluted workings of the human imagination, while showing humorously and memorably the futility of attempting to record a life in totality. For Pascal, design is an *expo facto* imposition or addition. He argues that lives have no such design, and that when it is imposed it is done at the expense of truth or verisimilitude. Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* has an imposed structure. To lend Acosta's narrative chronological order, one would read the chapters in this order: 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12. Chapters 6, 7, 9, 11, and 13 all deal with Acosta's past; the other chapters relate the present occurrences of his life. In the way Acosta has presented the chapters there is a highly structured alternation between past and present. This intermingling of time shows how both have influenced his life: his present malady is a result of his unique past. Yet the honesty of this design (superimposed structure) is what Pascal calls into question.

As obvious from the title of Pascal's treatise, he is also much concerned with the idea of truth. Since it is impossible to include everything, autobiographers must edit or filter experience–giving only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Yet it is often what writers leave out that calls into question their sometimes deliberate attempts to mislead the reader. Many autobiographers suffer from the anxiety, whether emotional or legal, that others may read the work and be offended. Though one would presume it was written to be read, this is not always the case. Herein lies one reason for the autobiographical novel where truth is sometimes (thinly) disguised

as fiction as in *Pocho, Bless Me, Ultima, ...y no se lo trago la tierra,* and *House on Mango Street* to cite a few examples.

One glaring example of omission occurs in Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* where he remains silent about his homosexuality and thus deliberately misleads the inattentive reader. Rodriguez writes about having "something like a conventional sexual life" at Stanford (130), but that he "felt [his] dark skin made [him] unattractive to women" (125). Although there are hints as to his sexual preferences through references to: never dating, "sexual anxieties," feelings of effeminacy, and shyness around girls–his sexual orientation is never avowed. In fact in a *People* magazine interview, Rodriguez is pictured in a restaurant sitting next to what no doubt many assumed was his girlfriend. Rodriguez does discuss homosexuality in his second book, but this came after the truth was more or less well known, and after he had been criticized by the Gay community for silence about this subject. In his defense however, one study, *A Qualitative Study of Identity Development in Gay Chicano Males*, ironically written by a Richard A. Rodriguez, shows that Chicano gays come "out of the closet" much later than their Anglo-American counterparts.

Memory also plays a role in the depiction of truth, though perhaps less centrally. Rodriguez writes his "middle class pastoral" about his halcyon youth of intense family closeness, but it may have only seemed idyllic after the fact, for memory serves as a filter. Another worthy example is Cleofas Jaramillo who writes an autobiography titled "Romance of a Little Village Girl," a work in which the very title warns the reader that what is forthcoming may be a romanticized version of the truth filtered by time and a less than perfect memory. Pascal quotes Maurois on this topic by writing that "memory is a great artist" (70). Undoubtedly this is why childhood often seems such a happy time. Pascal is forceful about the unreliable role of memory. He argues that "The distortion of truth imposed by the act of contemplation is so over-riding a qualification of autobiography that it is indeed a necessary condition of it..." (72). In other words, because memory can be particularly faulty, the very notion of truth in autobiography is called into question. And this of course assumes that the autobiographer is indeed trying to relate experience as accurately as possible, which is not always be the case: witness Oscar Acosta and Richard Rodriguez. One must wonder how many autobiographers set out with predetermined agendas; Rodriguez, for one, has been accused of this. A related aspect, brought up by Pascal,

concerns the notion of subjectivity and objectivity. Autobiography should imply subjectivity, but does it? Should it? Can it? Is an attempt at objectivity even the best approach?

Within this genre there are also blatant lies, exaggerations, and half truths–accusations perhaps more representative of Acosta's work, although one can easily defend him as an autobiographical novelist, something at which he does succeed if indeed he has failed at straight-forward autobiography–if there is such a thing. Pascal has written that "It will usually be the case that where a lie is the result of a calculated intention to appear right or important, damage is done to autobiographical truth" (82). And while "factual truth" may be somewhat suspect in autobiography, Pascal warns that it must never be dismissed: "Not only does the reader expect truth from autobiography, but autobiographers themselves all make more or less successful efforts to get at the truth, to stick to it, or at least try to persuade us they are doing so" (83). Interestingly, and as an aside, many 18th century novelists attempted to pass off their fictions as truth–by employing methods used by autobiographers–in an effort to legitimize fiction: most notably Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Sterne. In attempting to convince readers of Clarissa's actual existence, to underscore that she is a real person, Richardson gives the exact time and day of her death. Acosta often gives specific times and dates as well: "I got into bed at 7:00 P.M. Friday night"; the fall of 1957; June of 1966; first of July 1967; January 9, 1968; Christmas Eve 1969; and Spring of 1972 to list a few. These dates, which are presented throughout both of his works, give immediacy and authenticity to his writing.

Pascal devotes chapters to some of the major categories of autobiography, those works which stress a particular outlook or concern: works that focus on childhood, philosophical point of view, the development of a calling in life. He also categorizes autobiographies by poets, autobiographies of the whole man, and autobiographical novels. Throughout Chicano literature there are examples (if partial) of all these categories.

In delineating the limits of autobiography, Pascal asserts that autobiography, "...is not a portrait, and its motivation is quite other than that of the biography. The autobiographer is not simply uncovering facts... but presenting an order of values that is his own. He must necessarily establish a sort of ideal image of himself..." (193). It is the degree to which images are idealized that raises the question of verisimilitude as in Acosta's

work. Furthermore, autobiographers of necessity must establish "an overriding purpose" to shape their work. They usually give something of an explanatory *apologia* or a *raison d'etre*, as in Rodriguez's case with affirmative action and bilingual education. Pascal concludes that "There is no final and complete truth about a man...So also the man changes as he writes his..." life (195).

In choosing two writers who have each written two full-length works, it is possible to look for progression or evolution in the author's life as it changes, or not, from one work to the other. Turning, then, to the works of Acosta and Rodriguez, we need to keep in mind the complex cultural heritage of the Mexican, the concerns that minorities have in the U.S., and how these matters are developed as they record their autobiographies.

CHAPTER THREE

Acosta's Disguises

In the brief span of his life, Oscar Zeta Acosta made a remarkable name for himself as one of the most colorful and controversial figures in Chicano letters. In high school he was a first-string football player, soloist on the clarinet, and student body president. He played with the 573rd Air Force Band, preached as a Baptist missionary in Panama, became a Lawyer then a leader in the Chicano movement, and ran for sheriff of Los Angeles County (allegedly receiving 100,000 votes and finishing second in a field of four). He also defended several high profile cases (and made it into the law books), remarkably subpoenaed 72 superior court judges in California on the basis of their racism, and met such luminaries as Anthony Quinn, Vicky Carr, Corky Gonzales, and Cesar Chavez. He became friends with Hunter S. Thompson (and appeared in his books as Dr. Gonzo), published two autobiographical novels, and then presumably disappeared in a sailboat off the coast of Mexico. Since then, according to Thompson, there have been apocryphal "Brown Buffalo sightings" around the world (in Calcutta, in the Caribbean, at a washateria, working the white slave trade, tending bar, running drugs, perhaps even at Graceland), so that in some circles Acosta has reached the status of an urban legend. In fact, according to Ilan Stavans "The word *Zeta* often appears in graffiti in East Lost Angeles murals..." (*Bandido*, 16). Stavans also mentions meeting a poet who swears Acosta is hiding out in a cave in Cuernavaca, Mexico. These accounts add to the Acosta mystique.

By anyone's measures he was remarkably successful at a number of pursuits; unfortunately, the different roles he played were part of the masks he wore. As the son of Mexican immigrants, Acosta was keenly aware of his status as a minority in Sacramento. His first work, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), chronicles first his assimilation and later his dis-assimilation, his search for cultural identity. Yet, Acosta is never quite comfortable with himself. Though his two works seem to work in tandem, presenting a unified whole, there is ample indication that the conclusion to

which Acosta leads us is not the most accurate. Acosta's complex character is difficult to interpret because of the many roles and disguises he adopts.

Initially he puts his cultural roots behind him and assimilates in an effort to escape the psychological pain that his hyphenated culture brings him. Then, he would have us believe, he discovers and accepts his new-found identity and becomes a leader in the Chicano movement. If Acosta is viewed as a leader in a social movement, he falls short. A more accurate approach is to regard him primarily as an artist and writer, for his association with the Chicano movement, like his associations in myriad other pursuits is short lived.

Unfortunately, Acosta did not live long enough to prove anyone's theories correct or incorrect. We have only his two books and a few articles with which to draw our conclusions, so we cannot be certain of how Acosta's life would have progressed. We cannot know if he would have returned to help the Chicano/as in East L.A. Acosta presents a complex characterization which warrants careful study in order to learn more of the Mexican-American psyche in association with and often in opposition to the Anglo-American.

One cannot read his works without feeling a sense of the tragic loss his death was to his friends and family as well as to the Chicano/a community. The more we study Acosta's life and work, the more we become aware of the difficulties and confusions he faced in spite of being so talented. Throughout his work there is an overwhelming sense of a quest for identity, but also a search for a worthy cause to which to devote himself: causes and associations which continually change.

And while his writing is perhaps tainted with the sub-culture of the 1960s, the era of beatnik flower children, this element certainly adds spice, along with something of a historical dimension, although to some modern readers this may seem dated if not actually offensive at times. Among other indiscretions, Acosta is often on drugs, vulgar, usually demeaning to women, but always painfully frank about his feelings. Because he is so self-disclosing one can develop a particular sympathy for him. Recently a full-length biography of Acosta was published by Ilan Stavans, as well as a volume of his collected works, and they help to show how colorfully Acosta lived. Stavans begins by noting the excesses in the life of Oscar Zeta Acosta.

Not only has Acosta been missing for thirty years, but for more than

half of that time, due to legal matters, his books were out of print which prevented him from receiving the critical attention he deserved. In December 1986–twelve years after his disappearance–Acosta was legally declared dead so that his books could be reprinted (Olivas, 854). While interested scholars always found a copy somehow, the general populace had no access to Acosta's books until 1989 when both were finally reissued. Despite these obstacles there has been some attention focused on *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and on *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, though certainly not enough. It is difficult to ignore his work, for it adds a great deal to the study not only of Chicano literature but to the genre of autobiography as well as to the study of the formation of identity. And, as a bonus, Acosta throws in the culture of the 60s and 70s to add yet another dimension to his work.

Acosta was not merely an autobiographical writer, though, for throughout *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* is interwoven a story worthy of the title "fiction." With his autobiography Acosta artistically intertwines a more fictional picaresque quest. It is the aesthetic and fictional side that has often been overlooked because many scholars have viewed Acosta primarily as a Chicano revolutionary leader. As with Rodriguez's critics, Acosta's have also been more interested in social-political concerns than in aesthetics. But taking this approach overlooks Acosta's essential contribution to the growing field of Chicano letters.

One of the major questions that soon surfaces when reading Acosta is that of authenticity. No doubt there are exaggerations along with blatant lies, but what portion of his narratives is actually true? It is almost impossible to resist asking about veracity, and a few scholars have attempted to document some of the evidence through their research, notably: Alurista, Bruce-Novoa, Michael Olivas, Norman Smith, Ilan Stavans, and even Hunter Thompson.

Arturo Ramirez addressees some of these concerns in an early review (1975). He feels that Acosta ultimately achieves "honesty and frankness in the account of his life by admitting that he is a great imposter" (46). This statement is a paradox, if not actually an oxymoron, but the statement points to the difficulty of coming to terms with Acosta's works. Acosta himself makes such statements as "I am not a hypocrite," ironic in that he has just suggested that he is a mere pretender. Nevertheless, Ramirez himself seems to shift his own views when he takes something of a "who

cares" attitude by enjoying the "...hyped-up fiction and extravagant exaggeration, deliciously outrageous, [which is] hilariously bigger than life ..." (46). So who cares if it "...takes off from fact, reality, what in fact really happened historically" (46). Those who do care are those who analyze the relationship between autobiography and fiction.

Jeanne Thwaites has discussed Acosta's use of irony which sheds light on his playing fast and loose with historical reality. She writes that he "...detests liars, but lies whenever he feels it is appropriate, and almost always to those in authority" (75). She notes other inconsistencies like all of his self-deprecation and then the statement that "I have never felt inferior to any man or beast" (*Autobiography* 200). One must question whether these are actually slips on Acosta's part or whether he is deliberately contradictory.

Acosta's novel is easily enjoyed as fiction, but to consider it as autobiography requires the reader to ask, and attempt to answer, many difficult questions, not only about motives, sincerity, and verisimilitude, but about style and form as well. Ramirez seems to contradict himself about Acosta, for after stating that it does not matter whether Acosta's narratives are true or not, he writes: "Acosta ...cuts through such high-flown rhetoric, unafraid of telling at least *his* truth–after all, it *is* true–,and so Acosta tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, embarrassing as it might be..." (50). A few paragraphs later Ramirez writes that "Acosta, tragically funny, hilariously sad, cannot help but tell the truth–and it hurts..." (50). Ramirez is generous with his praise for, it may be argued, it is unsafe to use the words "Acosta" and "truth" in the same sentence. Admittedly, Ramirez does later qualify his views on Acosta by stating that "Acosta, then, is ultimately a truthful liar," but here again we end up with nothing but an oxymoron and a paradox. The distinction that Ramirez does not make sufficiently clear in his essay is that Acosta is very self-disclosing about his weakness and for lack of a better word, vulgarities.

Acosta's work has something of a "tell all" aspect to it, and while this can parade as frankness, it is not necessarily a full disclosure. What Acosta does disclose (pun intended) is what Ramirez refers to here: "Oscar Zeta Acosta is often outrageous, at times explicitly exposing both his private thought and his private parts" (52), but, it may be added, often little else. There are several glaring omissions some of which have already been noted. Consider that although Acosta was married twice through many of

the events that he details, no mention is made of his wives nor of his son, Marco (with whom I have talked by phone a few times). Thus, Acosta's philandering seems less wrong. We would probably view him a little differently were we to know that his escapades occurred while he was a husband and father.

Ramirez gives a list of Acosta's assumed identities: drug addict and alcoholic, aspiring writer, faded beatnik, stoned peacenik, a flower *vato,* a thirty-three-year-old kid, a bar-hopper who humps bar-flies, a victim of alienation, existential man, a living *T.V. Guide*, ulcer-ridden psychiatric patient, Baptist missionary, professional revolutionary, Chicano activist, and (take note) a middle-aged phony-ass mystic. What is puzzling, however, is that Ramirez presents Acosta as starting out a "middle-class assimilated Chicano" (48), a title perhaps more appropriate for Rodriguez, for in Acosta this conclusion is not fully corroborated by the text. Ramirez draws this conclusion because Acosta "...hardly knows any Spanish until much later" (48). But speaking only English hardly makes one a middle-class American.

Ramirez seems to accept the conclusion that Acosta desires the reader to adopt, a conclusion which I maintain is suspect: that Acosta "...finds solace, a budding desire to both affirm his Chicano identity and to write" (48). Unlike most who overlook Acosta's overwhelming desire to write, Ramirez does list this as a central concern. And I will argue that it is virtually his only genuine concern. Nevertheless, in characterizing the content of Acosta's work, Ramirez lists the essence as "...a desperate search for personal and collective identity..." (51).

In a short biographical sketch, Joe D. Rodriguez similarly argues that Acosta's work "...focuses on ethnicity and the ways that people of Mexican ancestry in the United States forge an awareness of themselves" (3). It is this search for a collective identity of which I remain skeptical by arguing that Acosta desires only an individual or personal identity, and one as a writer, rather than a communal identity as a Chicano–as Genaro Padilla and others have argued.

Most Chicano critics are a little too quick to see genuine change in Acosta; they want to see a metamorphosis from a mostly assimilated man, to one who increasingly reverts to, or re-adopts his Mexican culture, dis-assimilates. But there is little analysis of Acosta's enduring identity complex; he is always uneasy with his Mexican side, and he continually

prizes or privileges the dominant group or culture. Thus, scholars may be acceding a little too much to Acosta, who never convinces me that he has put together all the pieces of his identity puzzle.

It is probable, that these conclusions are encouraged by Acosta who may purposely denigrate himself in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* only to make himself appear more heroic in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People Revolt*. The heroic figure in Acosta's second book, Buffalo Z. Brown, is still another of the many masks and disguises that Acosta continually adopts. Hunter Thompson attempts to show that Acosta was neither as well-loved nor as heroic as he portrays himself. University of Houston law professor Michael Olivas has stated that Acosta almost always had co-counsel and was not the sole attorney defending the cases delineated in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* as seems to be the case from reading the book.

Oscar Zeta Acosta's highly structured autobiography begins and ends with a central image–that of his looking into a mirror. Between the opening scene and the final pages of *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* there lies a pilgrimage toward self-realization that necessitates the shedding of various masks and roles as he attempts to come to a sense of self-understanding and self-acceptance. Along this journey Acosta recounts many painful details about growing up a minority in a predominantly Anglo-American (and sometimes racist) culture. One of Acosta's greatest concerns is his sense of identity and self-worth. He begins his narrative by standing naked in front of a mirror. Acosta uses this tactic to disarm the reader, for this technique suggests that a full and honest disclosure is forthcoming. Immediately Acosta begins to present himself negatively: he mentions his fat belly, his dark skin, his Cro-Magnon features, his habit of masturbating in the shower, and more. He tells us that he stares into the mirror for answers (12). Although Acosta exposes himself to the reader: his weaknesses, his vulnerability, and his fears, yet he still wears a disguise, for this seemingly full disclosure is immediately followed by his adopting the role of Hollywood's leading men: Bogart, Cagney, Robinson, McQueen, and Charles Atlas. Acosta alternatively exposes himself and hides or disguises himself.

The mirror does two things; it reflects his self-identity, and it provides what he thinks is the outsider's view of himself. He views himself as others might see him; he regards himself critically. Acosta's sister Anita has

commented that her brother, Oscar, spent a good deal of time posturing in front of mirrors: "...He felt grandiose from early on. He knew he had been called to play a historical role because when he was in front of the mirror, one got the feeling he was practicing. He was acting. Acting out the man he would later become" (*Bandido* 24). This practicing and acting also serve as practice for the many roles he will adopt. As previously mentioned, though in passing, Juan Rodriguez has traced the motif of the mirror in various works of Chicano literature: *I Am Joaquin, Peregrinos de Aztlan, ... y no se lo trago la tierra*, and "Un Hijo del Sol" along with the works of Acosta and others. Genaro Gonzalez's "Un hijo del sol" presents an image of the protagonist, Adan (Spanish for Adam), whose self-gaze parallels that of Acosta and Rodriguez. Gonzales writes:

> A large wall mirror faces him. He tries to look at the mirror with detached inspection, but his gaze immediately locks him into the mirror...In doing so, his eyes alternately become beholder and beheld...Adan stared...Two pairs of eyes–those of himself and of his reflection–mesmerized each other...He felt himself as being some place outside of his body. Where am I?...Spaced out. Estoy afuera. Yo soy...Adan nadA. Adan nadA.... (Quoted by Juan Rodriguez 172)

Adan sees himself reflected as nadA, nothing. The combination of words becomes not only a palindrome but something of a statement about identity. Adan is nothing. Adan is a nobody. In commenting on the above quote, Juan Rodriguez notes that viewing himself in the mirror does not resolve Adan's identity problems. Instead the image in the mirror underscores the alienated condition of the Chicano. He further argues that on occasion this alienation manifests itself in the protagonist/individual living a sordid or decadent life, evident in Acosta. Most of the time, however, this alienation is manifested as a separation, a confusion, an isolation characterized by introspection and existential anguish (172). Juan Rodriguez maintains that when faced with an image of an alienated self, Chicanos in literature seek to evade this reality which is manifest in a search for identity. A favorite technique is the adoption of masks, the identification with others, the borrowing of an other's identity, or the development of multiple personalities–all of which may begin to manifest themselves from childhood. All of which are amply evident in the works of Acosta and Richard Rodriguez.

Acosta's self-exposure before the mirror, and in front of the reader,

serves to disarm the audience in another manner as well. Acosta presents such a dim view of himself that readers can only come to improve upon their estimation of him, for he has started off by showing us his worst features. He calls himself names, so to speak, before anyone else can: a technique also employed by Rodriguez at the beginning of each of his works. Acosta calls our attention to his large brown stomach, his peasant hands, Indian nose, and his insignificant pig eyes. He also confesses to having had at least two nervous breakdowns, and to undergoing psychiatric treatment. But while Acosta is quick to note that he could, theoretically, lose weight, he cannot so easily change the color of his skin or his physical features. Although he adopts disguises and hides behinds masks, he knows that underneath he is still the *Indio*'s son, he is still a brown buffalo.

Acosta relates his humble origins and subsequent poverty. His father was an Indian peasant from Durango Mexico (72). Acosta claims he is just a peach picker's son. His father works as a janitor and has only a third-grade education. His mother works at a cannery (54). They lived in a dirt-floor, two-room shack and they had to pump water and use oil lamps at night (72). This barrio was a place where there were no Anglos. This early setting serves to underscore his sense of difference. He incorporates the idea that he is different, and then devotes part of his life to assimilating, to proving himself worthy of the blond-haired blue-eyed girls from American: an obsession from which he might never have recovered, as he and his first wife both state.

Within his community of Riverbank California, and in a discussion of his childhood, Acosta writes of feeling an outsider to both groups: the Anglos, and the Mexican-Americans. Acosta and his brother had to defend themselves not only from the Anglos but also from the meanest and toughest Mexicans who considered them outsiders. Because the Acosta's had originally come from El Paso Texas, the locals said they were not *real* Mexicans (77). Then Acosta comments that he had not expected the Chicanos to act like gringos (77). Even within a community of Mexican immigrants there is discrimination, something Acosta expected only from the Anglo community. Acosta records that because he was Mexican he had to fight against Okies. Little did they realize that Acosta was not accepted by the Mexicans either. Acosta's town was tripartite: "Mexicans, Okies and Americans. Catholics, Holy rollers and Protestants. Peach pickers, cannery workers and clerks" (78). And so Acosta takes his place among the semi-

outcasts of Riverbank, but even in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, Acosta still seems to feel a distance between himself and the Chicano militants.

In a passage that echoes Richard's Bradford's descriptions of the different groups in Sagrado, New Mexico, Acosta reflects: "Is it any wonder then that Vernon called me Jigaboo? Maybe if black people...had lived in Riverbank they would have been the niggers. But...I grew up a fat, dark Mexican–a Brown Buffalo–and my enemies called me a nigger..." (*Autobiography* 86).

Also of paramount importance, to both Acosta and Rodriguez, is skin color. Acosta states that "Everyone in the Valley considers skin color to be of ultimate importance. The tone of one's pigmentation is the fastest and surest way of determining exactly who one is" (86). Acosta's mother referred to her husband as an *indio* when he would drink. Or when Acosta misbehaved, his mother would not let him back in the house until he stopped acting like an Indian. Similarly Acosta's mother tells her daughters "...to lay off the tortillas with hunks of colored margarine if they didn't want to end up marrying 'some Indian'" (86). The idea of Indian is presented as the lowest caste: below the status of the Mexican. The Indian is considered to be without the supposedly ennobling effects of mixture with Spanish blood. For Acosta's mother, the word Indian is used as an epithet, an insult, and it seems Acosta developed a complex about this aspect of his heritage. Similarly, Richard Rodriguez devotes an entire chapters to the subject of complexion.

Acosta feels keenly the discrimination and the segregation that takes place in Riverbank. Knowing well the policy that Mexicans are not allowed in the public pool in the Anglo-American side of town, Acosta insists on testing the limits: he insists on trying to be incorporated with the others. But the young woman at the gate wont let him in. It is easy for us today to forget about this kind of racism and segregation that existed and in more subtle forms still exists. For Acosta, this rejection, this ostracism, contributed to his sense of being on the periphery, of being an outsider, of being unaccepted. And it is the cumulative effects of this treatment that eventually has such a great bearing on Acosta's life and confused identity. Perhaps not so coincidentally, Rodriguez relates a similar experience with swimming pools in his *Hunger of Memory*.

While visiting Mexico, as an adult, Acosta has the same kinds of

problems: the Mexicans do not accept him, and neither do the Americans. Acosta finds acceptance in neither camp. This is not only frustrating but conducive to an identity complex. Although Acosta's father was a patriotic WWII veteran, Acosta writes that he does not share his father's feelings probably for the reason that he felt excluded from/by the dominant group.

Acosta lacks a sense of nationality and patriotism. He attempts to find his individual identity rather than a communal identity. Before he can begin self-discovery, he must escape from his unhappy present, which includes his ethnicity, and come to terms with his past. During high school, Acosta immerses himself in social activities and is successful at assimilating into the Anglo-American world: he is elected Jr. class president. He is the solo clarinetist and has the lead role in school play. He quits hanging around with his Mexican grade-school buddies, and associates with Anglo kids instead (112). Beginning in high school, Acosta separates himself from "ethnic" concerns. While enjoying success as something of a big man on campus, Acosta's Mexican identity goes into remission. He tires of his buddies' "us" and "them" attitudes. Yet when trying times come, he is quick to bemoan the disadvantage he attributes to his heritage, particularly in his associations with women.

In "Oscar Zeta Acosta: The Brown Buffalo and His Search for Identity," Kimberly Kowalczyk sets out to show that, "...what is innovative in [Acosta's] treatment of these two texts is how he manages to depersonalize himself to such an extent that he becomes a fictionalized character much farther removed from the author than the protagonist of an autobiography tends to be" (198). One must question however the reason for this depersonalization. Does Acosta attempt to transcend his identity, or is he merely searching for one that he, or mainstream America, might find more attractive? Similarly, why is Acosta depersonalized–is it intentional or unavoidable? And while Kowalczyk feels that Acosta's autobiography is a "search for a unique racial identity" Acosta continually rejects being given a title or category; witness his adoption of various disguises all of which mislead others, at least partially. In other words, Acosta would resist that he has a racial identity–feeling that his experience is completely unique and not part of a communal whole. He rejects himself as a Mexican and as an American and adopts an entirely new category–and one, incidently, that was never really adopted by anyone else–that of a brown buffalo and later as that of the cockroach people, the downtrodden.

Kowalczyk acknowledges that "At first Acosta denies his Chicano heritage mainly because he has always felt himself to be an outsider unable to belong to any group" (200); I maintain that this is true to the end, not merely at first.

In spite of Acosta's rejection of the label Mexican-American or even Chicano, Kimberly Kowalczyk astutely notices that Acosta is quick to pin cultural/ethnic labels on others. She notes that he has difficulty seeing others devoid of cultural background even though he tries to avoid his own. "Tom is his Irish-Catholic boss...Ted Casey speaks in a 'Brooklyn-Irish' way, Jose Ramon Lerma is a Mexican fag, and June MacAdoo is a 'Rumanian lass from South Carolina' with a Jewish grandmother" (Kowalczyk 200). Not mentioned by Kowalczyk are Dr. Serbin, Acosta's "Jewish shrink," the "greasy wops" (Italians), Okies to whom Acosta continually refers, the Swedish babes, and Filipino barkers. Ethnic and cultural categories are very important to Acosta despite the irony of his telling Serbin that he does not have time for "that racial crap." Acosta is well aware of the labels society attaches to others.

Kowalczyk maintains that Acosta's involvement in the Chicano movement is because of his search for an identity. According to her, he participates when he "...knows who he is and he no longer has to hide behind masks to fit in with Gringo or Mexican society" (202). I argue that he joins the Chicano movement because he has still not found an identity with which he is happy other than that of writer. Acosta soon abandons the Chicano movement, and he is quick to tell us, from the very beginning, that his participation in the movement will be short-lived (and almost exploitative).

Acosta's autobiographical novel pivots around several literal and symbolic journeys: actual road trips, trips on drugs, a trip in search of his past, and a psychoanalytical trip *vis-a-vis* his psychiatrist. Acosta embarks on a torturous journey in order to find his roots. Nevertheless, Acosta pretends to have no interest in his past. For example, he writes that he has "...no love for memories of the past" (18); nevertheless, in his green 1965 Plymouth, he holds the wheel and plunges "...headlong over the mountains and into the desert in search of [his] past" (71). He criticizes his psychiatrist, William M. Serbin M.D. (his actual name) for being obsessed with matters of race. He feels that Dr. Serbin "...is hung up on ancient history" (19). The irony is that Acosta is also, but he is either unwilling to

admit it, or worse, unaware of it.

Acosta is dissatisfied with his self, his body, his skin color, his illness, his job, his romances (and impotency), in short, his life, so he quits his job as a Legal Aid attorney and embarks on a personal quest dragging the reader along in tow. And while the roots of his malady are difficult to pinpoint with accuracy, his mother contributes to his poor self-image. He writes that she "...had me convinced I was obese, ugly as a pig and without any redeeming qualities whatsoever" (82). This criticism from the most significant woman in his childhood taints Acosta throughout life. Similarly Rodriguez was led to feel (in part by his mother) that because of his dark skin, because of his "Indian" features, he was unattractive.

The first five chapters of Acosta's autobiography delineate the present existence of the author with minor revelations as to his past. The subsequent chapters alternate between past and present until the chronology comes together. This intermingling of past and present serves to highlight the importance that his past still maintains on his present life. In order to find peace, Acosta feels he must either rid himself of his heavy cultural baggage, or come to terms with it. With the beginning of chapter six, the Brown Buffalo leaves his life in San Francisco and begins a journey of self-discovery that leads, among other places, to the site of his birth before bringing him full circle to California.

As mentioned, Acosta's trip takes several forms. There is a literal road trip in which he travels from San Francisco to Idaho, Colorado, (maybe Georgia), Texas, and Mexico, while ultimately going to Los Angeles. The other journey takes him to his past, to his childhood, where he shares with the reader his experiences growing up in an attempt at confronting his difficult past. Another journey is undertaken on the psychiatrist's couch, but this journey is less well developed.

The final form of travel, which seems to permeate Acosta's narrative, is the hallucinatory/psychedelic trips taken on drugs such as LSD and peyote. But after a certain point, Acosta realizes that the escape provided by drugs is only temporary. He must eventually deal with reality and with his own identity. While in Vail, he remarks: "I was sick of the booze and the drugs were completely useless by now" (184). Ironically, by the time he becomes Buffalo Z. Brown, Chicano Attorney and leader of the Cockroach People, he is again frequently on drugs.

Acosta decides to go to El Paso, the place of his birth, in search of his

roots. He wants to "find the object of [his] quest...[and] find out just who in the hell [he] really was" (184). Acosta's desire to find himself is clearly paramount. He goes and scours "the neighborhood of [his] youth" (184). He stands in front of the house where he once lived, and he cries cathartic tears. He exclaims: "I've come to MEXICO, do you understand? From Riverbank to Panama, to Frisco, to L.A., to Alpine, to Vail and to Juarez..." (189). Although he reaches his destination, he is to find few lasting answers there.

In Juarez, Mexico he again hears that melodic Spanish, the language of his youth, a language he no longer speaks. He gives a long romantic description of a language for moonlit nights, starry nights, a language perfect in every detail (186). Though reminiscent of Rodriguez's reflections on language, part of this romanticized nostalgia is evoked because Acosta had been forbidden to speak Spanish in school, under threat of expulsion. And even though he is now in Mexico, he still cannot speak his father's language.

During his quest and throughout his life, Acosta has assumed various roles and masks until he comes to his roots in El Paso and its sister city Ciudad Juarez. He lies to Karin and tells her that he is a Samoan by the name of Henry Hawk. He tells others that he is a Black Foot Indian Chief from Oklahoma who raises buffaloes. Alternately he is Oscar Acosta, Chicano Lawyer, an Aztec, Buffalo Zeta Brown, and of course, the Brown Buffalo. These facades are means to avoiding his Mexican identity, his culture, and his painful past. He claims that everyone is interested in his ancestry, and that he has been mistaken for American Indian, Spanish, Filipino, Hawaiian, Samoan and Arabian (68). Later he records: "After all, I've been a football man, a drunk, a preacher, a mathematician, a musician, a lawyer ... and a brown buffalo" (197). Naturally these multiple identities can lead to a schizophrenia of sorts; with so many identities, it is almost as if he has none. Acosta also seems uncomfortable with the conclusions others make. He especially does not want others to assume that he is an authority on things Mexican (101). In a book review, "In Quest of Oscar 'Zeta' Acosta," Steven Kellman points out that Acosta has been dubbed "The Hispanic Malcolm X as well as a Mexican-American Robin Hood, a Chicano Kerouac, the Hispanic Mahatma Gandhi, a modern Hernan Cortes, even Don Quixote, the next Augusto Cesar Sandino, and a West Coast Ernesto 'Che' Guevara" (19). Kellman mentions that Acosta adopts the

name "...Zeta, after the revolutionary general played by Emilio Fernandez in *La Cucaracha*, a 1958 movie directed by Ismael Rodriguez" (20). Acosta never seems to be without a disguise to fit any situation, yet this posturing prevents him ultimately from understanding himself and leads him to an impasse, an identity crisis.

The fictional personae he assumes help him avoid the daily confrontation with society and with the proverbial man in the mirror. He not only assumes names but roles as well. "I can make any kind of face [read mask] you ask" (197). In *Distant Neighbors*, we read that supposedly Mexicans have inherited the tradition of masks from the Indians. The masks, "...represent animals, spirits or historical, religious or mythical figures, [which] underlie the importance of symbols that either threaten or protect" (313). These masks or shields, for the Mexican, serve other purposes as well: "With all intimacy shielded by masks of formality, Mexicans seem like actors, constantly adapting their roles to circumstances without risk of spiritual exposure or commitment" (13).

Similarly, in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of Mexican Masks. He writes that regardless of station or status, Mexicans wear masks to provide "...a wall of indifference and remoteness between reality and [themselves] a wall that is no less impenetrable for being invisible. The Mexican is always remote, from the world and from other people. And *from himself*" (29 italics added). According to Paz, for the Mexican *macho*, invulnerability is the measure of manliness. For these same reasons, there is often reluctance to yield oneself fully (psychologically) to another, even a lover. Acosta circumvents these self-disclosures, and hence vulnerability, by merely adopting a persona and then exposing that.

Although neither fully American, Mexican, nor Indian, Acosta attempts escape from self-realization by adopting the different names and occupations that society imposes, or approves. When he finally arrives in Mexico and meets a woman who asks him what tribe he is from, he thinks: "I wanted to give her the Samoan bit again as I had done all those years of my search for a reconciliation with my ancestry. But it would not come. I could not joke about it as I had with the *americanos*" (190). The woman's question is legitimate, but Acosta really has no answer: he really does not know who or what he is. He finally reaches a point where he no longer wants to be the actor hiding behind a mask. Ironically when confronted by

Mexican authorities, Acosta adopts more of an Anglo-American identity. He tells the judge that he is an attorney, and adds: "I am guilty of all those nasty things, vile language, gringo arrogance and *americano* impatience with lazy *Mexicanos*" (193).

Acosta's assumption of identities, in an attempt to hide his own, takes another form as well. In front of the mirror, he poses as if he were Charles Atlas. He makes a face and refers to himself as Mister Joe Cool, as Humphrey Bogart (12). He also attempts to impersonate or identify with James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Steve McQueen, and other popular Hollywood heroes whom, he says, are among his favorite men. These men are revered and admired widely; they represent nearly the opposite of what Acosta thinks of himself. They represent manliness, good looks, and self-confidence or self-assurance. They provide for him a means of escape from a pedestrian, and painful, identity. Thus there are two forms of escape. On the one hand, he assumes roles of other types of minorities, roles not so far from his real self; on the other hand, he pretends to be heroic Hollywood figures.

In "*La busqueda de identidad y sus motivos en la literatura chicana*" Juan Rodriguez notes that because of a sense of alienation that minority writers sometimes feel, they seek a variety of ways to evade these realities. A favorite technique is the adoption of masks and the identification with others which is blatantly apparent in Acosta who alternately hides or embellishes his identity.

Even after his allegedly successful search for identity, and acceptance of self in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, in his second autobiographical book, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, Acosta is still posturing. He transforms himself into "Zeta, the world, famous Chicano Lawyer who helped start the last revolution..." (*Autobiography* 199). In his second book, Acosta says he is "...no longer fat. Gone were the blubber and the belly, the shanks and jowls...I was tough and hard...For months now, I had been without booze and dope. No whiskey, no wine, no beer. No more acid or grass or hash...my head had cleared. I could see again. I could find my story, then get fat again and live like a king. It's all a crazy circle... (*Revolt* 14). Acosta also details his morning calisthenics: bends, squats, backbends and pushups (16). Although Acosta probably did in reality do these things, it nevertheless shows his concern with how others view him. It is a calculated attempt at getting the reader to view him in a certain way.

We must keep in mind that he continually changes in all but one regard. One page after the above quote, in recounting how a tarantula is crawling across him, Acosta tells the reader that he has "...seen enough James Bond flicks to know better than to strike or jump" (15). Again there is something of an identification with popular, suave heroes.

That Acosta is uneasy with his identity is symbolically represented by his illness. From the opening pages of his first book, in an attempt to purge himself, Acosta carefully details his attempt to vomit into a toilet (12). Still later he records that he is having trouble vomiting, "...only rancid, hot air blows...the dry heaves! My stomach burns..." (25). Symbolically, Acosta tries to regurgitate the past and all that he feels is negative: his weaknesses and fears. Interestingly nothing comes up. For Acosta is constipated physically (literally) and emotionally (a form of withholding), so it is not easy to bring up the elements from his past that have led to his neurosis for which he sees a psychiatrist. And while Acosta tries to pass this off as a mere physically malady, Dr. Serbin, realizes that constipation can have emotional and psychological roots. But Serbin also serves as an antagonist. In one instance he supposedly tells Acosta: "After all, you're just a little brown Mexican boy" (25). Serbin becomes something of a devil perched on Acosta's shoulder, playing to his fears and insecurities. In this sense, Serbin becomes Acosta's own worst self, something of an alter-ego, someone that knows him intimately, but also someone who uses that knowledge to exploit his insecurities.

Another source of insecurity, perhaps the major source, for Acosta, is how women view him. Alan Riding has discussed the unusual Mexican male view of women which has some bearing, tangentially, on Acosta's relationships with women. Riding argues that a Mexican's worst fear is betrayal, and that this fear is a result of the mestizaje, the conquest, domination, force and rape. After discussing the important role of the Virgin de Guadalupe, Riding argues that in Mexico, "...the wife, who as an object of sex is considered an aberration from feminine perfection, must be humiliated, since a husbands's faithfulness or excessive affection would imply vulnerability and weakness" (10-11).

Acosta is certainly obsessed by betrayal to the extent that he has murderous thoughts toward June MacAdoo who rejects him. Yet he also idealizes and worships women as evident in his stating that he elevated Alice to the level of deity. Acosta tells the priest that he is guilty of a

mortal sin: "I've made a ...god out of my girlfriend...I still felt guilty as sin for worshipping Alice, especially after she'd dumped me..." (130-131).

Octavio Paz writes that many Mexican men view women "...as only a reflection of masculine will and desire" (35), though it is difficult to determine the extent to which Acosta was influenced by traditional Mexican notions. Of course Paz does not condone these attitudes, between men and women, and others which he depicts in his study of Mexican life and thought; he merely attempts to point them out.

Although Acosta was something of a big man on campus in high school, he states that even so, he never had a girl friend (107). It seems that his many pursuits were to make himself "worthy" of female attention, or as a form of compensation for his ethnicity and lower class. Years later his first girlfriend leaves him suddenly and without explanation: she "...woke up one morning and told me she didn't love me anymore" (48). Another woman tells him that he kisses like a horse. These rejections contribute to his anxiety about women.

An early and central source of Acosta's pain is his love for and obsession with Anglo-American girls. Jane Addison, a young, blond-haired, pig-tailed Anglo girl becomes the ideal to strive for–his "first true love. The original *Miss It*" (90). But even at that age, Acosta is on guard. He writes, "I knew that women never tell you what they really think of you" (90). Already he hints at or imagines the forthcoming rejection. This view or attitude is in keeping with those presented by Alan Riding and Octavio Paz, previously quoted.

Jane fuels Acosta's imagination; for two years she is the object of his dreams until he is summarily rejected–quickly and painfully. In front of all his classmates, Jane asks the teacher: "...will you please ask Oscar to put on his shirt? ...He stinks" (94). Everyone laughs, and Acosta is deeply humiliated: "I *am* the nigger, after all...I am nothing but an Indian with a sweating body and faltering tits...I shall never be able to undress in front of a woman's stare. I shall refuse to play basketball for fear that...I might have my jersey ripped from me in front of those...pigtailed, blue-eyed girls from America" (94-95). Although he attributes his breaking heart to the overwhelming weight of his stomach, it is of course a result of the rejection and humiliation imposed by Jane. His unhappiness with himself becomes even more pronounced. Acosta from then on tries to become what he is not. He assimilates in the numerous ways already detailed. He becomes an actor

with the accompanying paraphernalia–masks that cover his identity. These adopted roles are but a series of self-denials. Because Jane said that he stinks, coupled with his own feelings of inferiority, Acosta becomes obsessed with hygiene. He writes that he is never without soap, and that no matter where he is, he showers every morning (15). Similarly, Acosta develops "a fear of bad breath" (32) and so voraciously chews gum as a mask to bad-breath.

Problems with Anglo girls surface continually. With Alice, for example, his desire is mediated through his friends. Since they prize her, Acosta allows them to dictate a standard of beauty. Prior to meeting Alice, Acosta philosophizes that there was always one objective, "to find the perfect woman. *Miss It."* He calls this the "dream of *our* collective design, the flower for *our* garden, the pin-up for *our* wall and the one *we* could all agree *we* would marry" (112 italics added). Notice his unusual use of the plural voice. Recall the passage quoted from Rene Girard, about the mediation of desire. Acosta's ideal is one that his buddies can agree upon, not one that he chooses for himself. After his buddy Dragalong, gives a glowing description of Alice, Acosta and his friends drive to her house where he first sees her in the summer of 1951. Keep in mind that she has already been deemed worthy of his attention by his male friends: "I only saw her for a moment but I knew she was the one. It was instant love after only the brief sight of a face of peach..." (112).

Although Alice soon displaces Jane as the new *Miss It*, he and she soon meet opposition from her family who dislike Mexicans. After inviting her to a school dance, Acosta receives a letter from her, stating that when she told her family her new boyfriend's name was "Oscar Acosta," they said she was never to speak to him again. Alice's mother made her write him a letter so that she would not even have to talk to him again (116). It was not only Alice's mother who opposed the friendship. Alice's stepfather "hated Mexicans more than life itself" (117), and he threatened Alice's mother with divorce if she allowed Alice to date a Mexican. "Period" (117). First he is rejected because he stinks, later because he is Mexican.

The issue of his family name creates part of the problem. Of course, it is not just the name but his ethnicity, skin color, class, and religion that lead her parents to create trouble. Naively, Oscar thinks that he can just change his name as easily as adopting a mask (117). He also naively assumes that she will convert from Baptist to Catholic. Acosta's mother, however, is of

a different opinion. In the middle of making tortillas, she tells him that he will go to hell if he changes his name (117). It is significant that she is making tortillas at the time, underscoring their ethnicity, their difference from the Anglo culture, a difference not to be altered so easily.

With Acosta's help, Alice is crowned "The Oracle Queen," but he is not allowed to escort her to the dance. They agree to meet at the dance even though she is under strict parental surveillance. Her parents call the police and sign a complaint. The police chief threatens to take Acosta to jail if they catch him with Alice again. So the relationship remains surreptitious. After Acosta graduates and enters the Air Force, Alice marries one of Acosta's Italian friends who is even darker-skinned and also Catholic. Acosta concludes that Alice's stepfather was just prejudiced against Mexicans (130). Though the emotion is understated, Acosta feels the rejection bitterly. His girlfriend did not wait for him; she would not allow her love for Acosta to defy her parents. And although she marries someone even darker, the Italian was ennobled because of European descent. Acosta stews about being dumped for a "greasy...Wop" (133). At this point Acosta becomes a Baptist, Alice's religion (and ironically he intended to convert her!). He converts his entire family, and becomes the "Mexican Billy Graham" as a missionary in Panama. His religious fervor is short-lived, however, for one day Acosta gives "up Jesus and the Baptist Church" and then "despised [himself] for being a hypocrite" (133). This despising of self is only thinly veiled throughout the narrative. In spite of a poor track record, Acosta cannot quickly exorcize images of Anglo women as ideals, since he has no interest in women from his own culture and heritage. He writes that in high school he never dated Mexican girls. He viewed them as boring, square, and homely, (113). Because of the ideal of beauty that society and his own friends set, Acosta finds Mexican women unattractive, for he has been acculturated to society's standard of beauty and self-worth. Betty Daves, Acosta's first wife, has gone on record as saying that Acosta viewed all women as potential lovers. She says that his early girlfriends left emotional scars in him, and that he never overcame their influence (*Bandido*, 36-37).

As noted, in high school Acosta tries to lose himself in the Anglo world, and compensate for his ethnicity, by involving himself in many activities. However, these roles become but masks or even shields that he wears to protect (or disguise) his identity. Later Acosta turns to the military

for a new role to play, for a means of escape. He also turns again to music and to religion, and finally as an attorney he becomes a spokesman, a legal representative for others. These pursuits provide temporary distraction, for every day he must stand in front of the mirror and gaze at his brown skin. His features do not change; and although he can hide from others behind his masks, or behind drugs, he does not successfully hide from himself for long.

After taking the Bar exam, Acosta meets and begins living with June MacAdoo–developing his first serious love affair. Although Acosta tells her that he "definitely wanted to marry her" and that he "loved her like a wife," She never responds emotionally; she never says she loves him. Instead she tells him stories about her Jewish grandmother who would die if she knew June was "living in sin with a Samoan" (48). Here again previous patterns are repeated, adding to Acosta's negative self-view and feeling of being rejected.

Acosta's sense of inferiority is not limited to his personal identity but extends to his occupation as well. As an attorney, Acosta feels that his taking night classes at The People's Law School does not measure up to those who received their training from more prestigious institutions. Even Acosta's brother attended the well-known Hastings Law school. Moreover, Acosta, who is employed at a Legal Aid clinic, feels inferior to those with private firms or private practices. Acosta fears having to argue with a "real" attorney. He complains that he was never taught how to "cross-examine hostile witnesses" in his "sleazy" law school that he attended at night (*Autobiography* 22). Acosta also feels that the judge's are friends with the other attorneys. He notes that they all dress alike and are members of the same class and view Acosta and his ilk as "socialist creeps, incompetent" (23).

As an attorney, Acosta also feels unqualified. He views himself as an imposter who can no longer pretend to be a lawyer. "It should be clear to you by now that *I am a mere pretender*" (30 emphasis added). His anxieties are not helped in that he failed to pass the Bar exam the first time. One of the reasons for Acosta attending law school, was to prove to others that he was capable of doing something difficult and useful–almost in an attempt to prove himself and gain acceptance. He writes: "...I decided to be a lawyer. Not to practice law. But just to get a job so I could write my life history..." (155).

The quest that comprises half of his first narrative leads him to his roots; there his mask seemingly starts to crumble when he is forced to confront his identity in front of a Mexican judge–a woman who represents authority, and law–his chosen profession. His disguises may have fooled others, but not her. She says "don't tell me this one's not Mexican." She advises him to go home and learn to speak Spanish. In essence, she asks him to get in touch with his heritage, his cultural roots, and his identity. Acosta feels rejected in Mexico, and ironically while attempting to cross the border back into the United States, the border guard asks for identification, for he questions Acosta's American citizenship and accuses: "You don't' look American..." (195). Acosta feels an outcast from both countries–wanted in neither Mexico nor in the United States. He feels alienated because he is accepted in neither place. Mexico fails to provide him with the answers he sought: "I...failed to find the answer to my search. One sonofabitch tells me I'm not Mexican and the other one says I'm not an American. I got no roots anywhere..." (196).

Nevertheless while in Mexico, Acosta makes certain realizations. Years after his experiences with Anglo school-girls, he thinks he is able to adopt a new ideal of female beauty–the Mexican woman. While in Juarez, Acosta states that brown Mexican women with black hair are the most beautiful in the world (though in high school he thought them dumpy and preferred blue-eyed blonds). In Mexico he claims to have purged the influence of Alice Joy or Jane Addison (188). From now on, he feels, Mexican women are the answer to his pain. He acknowledges that his ulcers have been a result of not accepting himself for who he is. He realizes that he has been running from his identity in a series of assumed characters. Here Acosta seems to arrive at self-acceptance by accepting the Mexican women he once disdained. Yet, like his other changes, this one is short-lived.

At the beginning of *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* Acosta tells us that he has not "...even held the hand of a Mexican woman, excepting whores who are all the same anyhow" (21). This could very well be a reference to the two prostitutes he met in Mexico, Sylvia and Teresa, who, on January 9, 1968, taught him "...how to be a serious Mexican for the first time in [his] life" (*Autobiography* 190). This supposedly epiphanic revelation, however, is called into question by so callously dismissing the prostitutes later as being all alike, and by adding: "My first and *last* true loves were both pig-tailed belles, and *the pattern stuck* with me. So what

is it? Had my old mother hit it on the head? *Am I ashamed of my race*?" (*Revolt* 24 emphasis added). He still asks the pointed question about his race despite the realizations he reports from *Ciudad Juarez*. Acosta's wife, Betty, confirmed that he never really got over his obsession with blonds.

As *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* concludes, the reader comes full circle to the opening image. After the long journey, Acosta claims he can confront the world he lives in. This newly-found knowledge is not painless but nevertheless essential for his progress. In conclusion, as at the beginning, he stands naked before the mirror, cries in sobs, and avows that he is a brown buffalo (195). Then he says he sleeps for 33 hours which symbolize one hour for each year of his life, as well as the number of years that Jesus lived. Acosta is supposedly reborn after his cathartic sleep; he emerges from his symbolic tomb to find that it is raining, and he is washed clean, baptized (197-8). He now believes that he is reconciled with his past, and that he can now look forward to his newly-discovered identity evident when he says, "For months, for years, no, all my life I sought to find out who I am...what is clear to me after this sojourn is that I am neither a Mexican nor an American...I am a Chicano by ancestry and a Brown Buffalo by choice" (198-9). At this point a mask is temporarily removed. He now feels that he can confront his image in the mirror with a renewed sense of self.

At the end of *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* Acosta is poised to embark on a new adventure (a new identity). He presents himself as having gained a stronger sense of self. Most of his assertions about finding himself and accepting his cultural heritage, however, are presented merely to give *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* a tidy end, for as an analysis of *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* will show, Acosta continues to be plagued by most of his early problems. Like skin color and weight, notions of identity are not easily shed, and he remains controversial to the end.

As should be evident, however, Acosta is merely one example. His confusion and anxiety does not speak for the majority of Mexican Americans. Many minorities, in fact, have highly positive self-images. Many feel their heritage is an asset not a liability. On the other hand, Acosta is certainly not the only minority to suffer the effects of colonization and marginalization so poignantly, and thus his narratives reveal something about the occasional clash between cultures.

CHAPTER FOUR

Acosta: Still Posturing

Critics tend to believe that at the end of *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* Acosta has found himself and accepted his cultural and ethnic identity, and that in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* he has come to terms with his past and become a great leader within the Chicano movement. Although a clear progression of Acosta's character seems apparent, surprisingly, he is never completely at home with his Chicano heritage, nor does he willingly lead his people toward freedom from Anglo domination and oppression. Instead, Acosta struggles with the same problems in the second book as in the first. His real motivation, even identity, is that of a writer in search of material rather than that of a participant or leader in a social movement. He succeeds remarkably at writing, but as a Chicano leader he falls short.

Charles Tatum's interpretation is commonly adopted in regard to Acosta's search for identity. Tatum writes that Acosta

> ...becomes progressively more disenchanted with his life as an urban lawyer and aware that he is culturally rootless. His experiences...provide him with little relief from his anguish, and it is only through the quest and attainment of his true identity as a Chicano that Acosta reckons with his internal struggle. In his second work, after proving himself worthy of La Raza as a fierce defender of his people, his life takes on direction and meaning. (112-113)

Many have been mislead by Acosta's fabrications and posturing, for Acosta life never really seems to take direction and meaning. Genaro Padilla argues that Acosta reconciles himself to his cultural roots after a sojourn in Mexico. Acosta's

> ...emptiness, alienation, and ambiguous identity are burned away. He awakens to renewed strength, clear-headedness, and to the realization of a unique cultural and historical reality...More than simply toward a rediscovery of his forgotten cultural roots, his sojourn has led to an expansive communal identity through which he projects his own role in the destiny of his people. (*Progression* 177)

These critics err in too readily believing what Acosta writes. Their arguments have been put forth, because at the conclusion of *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, Acosta has returned to Mexico and there supposedly rediscovered his lost roots, his heretofore repressed identity (if only it were as simple as that–finding our identity on the ground somewhere). However, in that same conclusion Acosta writes that he has "...failed to find the answer to [his] search. One [person] tells me I'm not a Mexican and the other one says I'm not an American. I got no roots anywhere" (196). At the beginning of *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, Acosta is supposedly transformed into a leader of the Chicano people–one who accepts and understands his culture. Not so. While Acosta himself may intend for us to draw these conclusions, the sub-text clearly shows otherwise.

One important item to remember is that Acosta wrote his last two works after all the events detailed had happened although they seem to be written as the events occur. The use of present-tense gives his writing immediacy. But both were written after the fact and in quick succession. At the end of part one, as it were, he specifically states that the rest of the story is forthcoming, for he has already lived through both parts of his narratives. Since he wrote one novel right after the other, had he wanted to show careful progression from a confused sense of identity to a great leader in the Chicano movement, he could have made smooth transitions without contradictions or recurrences of the same identity problems. The existence of these problems highlight the difficulty of viewing his works as the progression of an individual. The contradictions occur because the two works are not novels, but autobiographical novels. Thus, as with life, neat structures, careful progression, and tidy conclusions are not always tenable.

An important key to Acosta's work is the realization of his desire to be a writer. This desire comes at least as early as 1956 when he is discharged from the Air Force and enrolls at Modesto Jr. College where he studies French and *creative writing*. There, he is encouraged by Doc Jennings to hit the road in search of experience. In L.A. he almost becomes a police officer, but he decides that his "real meat lay in writing" (152). Finally, in his "senior year of college" he decides to quit college and work on his first novel, *A Cart For My Casket*, the early version of his autobiography (152). There is an interlude in which Acosta, as a recreational therapist, takes up with the rich and libidinous Barbara, and while they are on their way to

Chicago–where her millions are supposedly stored in a vault–Acosta wakes up and makes this declaration: "...the very first thing that came to my mind...I've got to get back to Frisco...I've got to finish my novel" (155). At this point he makes the statement about his reasons for having studied law: he just wanted to prove his worth (to a publisher and editor) and have a job so that he could write the story of his life (155). He repeats this idea in his second book when he writes that his degree and license were merely to prove "...that even a fat brown Chicano like me could do it" (*Revolt* 16).

First and foremost, then, it may be argued that Acosta is a writer, not a Mexican-American lawyer, not a civil rights movement leader, not a revolutionary, and certainly not a messiah figure. This undermines the popular theory of Acosta as the great Chicano attorney and social-movement leader. Acosta does not study law primarily to help those of his own background, but merely to facilitate and legitimize his true love, writing.

Acosta's association with the Chicano movement, with the Brown Berets, is always tenuous. At the end of *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, Acosta comes up with the plan to present the demands of the brown buffalos to the U.S. Government and to the United Nations, but immediately he writes, "...and then I'll split and write the book. I have no desire to be a politician. I don't want to lead anyone" (198). Here, once again, he subordinates law and politics in general to writing, while clearly indicating that his association will be temporary. These very feelings are again echoed at the beginning of *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* where he writes that he has no intention of practicing law or pitting himself against anything. "I was only anxious to find 'THE STORY' and write 'THE BOOK' so that I could split to the lands of peace and quiet..." (14).

From the beginning then, his intentions are clear: he tells the Chicano militants that he is "...searching for material to write an article for the New York *Times* and nobody is impressed" (25). For the Chicanos *The New York Times* is far removed from their reality in East Los Angeles. Acosta's friend tells him that he should instead write for *La Voz* [La Raza]. On another occasion in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, he states that he speaks as a *historian* and as a recorder of events albeit with a sour stomach. Much later he indicates his growing frustration with political movements when he shouts to the rooftops "...we need writers, just like we need lawyers. Why not me? I want to write" (249). He also reminds us that politically he

believes in "absolutely nothing" (*Autobiography* 21). His loyalty or political affiliations are called into question when he states: "I wouldn't lift a finger to fight anyone" (21).

Notice the order of Acosta's list: "I'm a writer...and a singer of songs. I just happen to be a lawyer and a fighter..." (223). Again, the emphasis is on writing not revolution. Take note of this same sort of order in this passage: "...here I am, running around the world, talking of writing and revolution and women and death" (227). His concern with writing is obvious, yet, in regard to revolution and social protest, Acosta is sometimes less than clear: "...who have we killed? Just how heavy are we? I am confused, but by the time we reach the house I have made two decisions. When I have finished this trial, I will write my book. Without fail..." (224).

All along Acosta has been clear about his commitment to writing. About this activity he has no doubts. He is so committed, in fact, that while in the midst of his busy legal work and trials he has already been seeking a publisher. In a conversation with Louie and with Corky Gonzales, Acosta tells them: "I'm also a writer...I just got a letter today from some broad up in Frisco...She says they would like to talk to me about doing some article or book" (229-30). If this letter from "some broad up in Frisco" was not regarding the publication of his novels with Straight Arrow Books, it may very well have been regarding the writing or publication of the story "Perla is a Pig" published in *Con Safos* in 1970, or "The East L.A. 13 vs. The L.A. Superior Court" published in *El Grito* out of Berkeley, also in 1970. It is evident that during the Chicano activism and the high-profile cases that Acosta defended, his mind was still very much on writing. Toward the end of *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* Acosta says that, "The book offer has made me enemies. That I would think to make money off the struggle for freedom of the Cockroaches has made some people whisper traitor, *vendido, tio taco*, uncle tom and a capitalist pig to boot" (249). Those with whom Acosta worked in L.A. are aware of his ulterior motives–the book. We know, however, that the desire to write preceded his involvement in *la causa*.

It is amply apparent that Acosta's initial interest is indeed opportunistic. He has been searching for a worthy cause with which to associate, as well as something to write about, and this uprising will have to do for a time. As this idea begins to grow, Acosta makes several resolutions at the beginning of *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*: "I will

change my name. I will learn Spanish. *I will write the greatest books ever written*. I will become the best...lawyer...I will save the world. I will show the world what is what and who...is who. Me in particular" (24, emphasis added). Notice that among this bravado there is again that concern with writing, placed high-up on the list, but also with presenting himself to the world. It is not enough to merely write about the Chicano militants, he must take an active role as writer and participant, the very definition of Gonzo journalism. Nevertheless, he has already clearly indicated at the conclusion of his first book that he has no desire to be a leader: a Messiah, Moses, Mao, or Martin. Even after Buffalo Zeta Brown decides to defend the East L.A. 13, he remains detached; after the case, he writes, "I will split to Acapulco, [and] write about the whole struggle..." (42). Acosta wants no long-term commitments to *La Raza*, only to writing. After the St. Basil acquittals, Acosta writes "I've got no commitments for...things seem to be in pretty good shape now, I think I'll drop out again...maybe write an article on my own..." (196). Readers of his works are already aware of this idea of dropping out, for in reality Acosta has tried his hand at quite a few endeavors all of which were eventually dropped. In his life he has been "a football man, a drunk, a preacher, a mathematician, a musician, a lawyer," a recreational therapist, a soldier, a gandy dancer, and a student (*Auto-biography* 197). In his writing, Acosta confesses that he considered joining the L.A. police force, and at another point in his life, he also wanted to become an engineer. He also ran for sheriff of L.A. county. Even while studying law Acosta worked as a copy boy at the *San Francisco Examiner*.

Because of these pursuits and interests, his friend Black Eagle understandably wonders about Acosta's commitment to the cause. Black Eagle says: "...look man...if you don't come through this time...I mean, we've been waiting all...summer to hear from you...where...have you been: I've got to tell them something" (*Revolt* 211). The words "this time" imply that Acosta has either let his friends down on other occasions, or shown a previous lack of strict commitment to the cause. That is not the first time that Acosta is accused of not being totally committed; on another occasion someone mentions that the *vatos* are wondering whether they even want Acosta to defend them. Taking the defensive, Acosta bursts out "What...do I have to apologize for? ...You know I don't want to be no... lawyer!" (222). Just after this outburst in a particularly tense moment, Acosta makes this telling proclamation: "I'm no kamikaze!... I'm a writer, and a singer of

songs. I just happen to be a lawyer and a fighter" (223). The lawyer and fighter business is secondary and, not surprisingly, almost an afterthought. On the last page of his second book he says: "I'm going to write my memoirs before I go totally crazy. Or totally underground...I took off...to write my swan song..." (281). There is no specific mention of the movement only of "our many problems." Once again, Acosta abandons another of his pursuits.

Acosta's first wife, Betty Daves, has discussed Acosta's sense of anxiety surrounding the birth of their son Marco because Marco was viewed by Acosta as a deterrent to his dream of being a writer: "He...was frustrated, depressed, disappointed...Now that he was turning into *un padre* [a father], he couldn't feel a sense of self-fulfillment. Since early on he had nourished titanic drams: to write the Great American Novel, to become the Great American Lawyer, to be known and applauded" (*Bandido*, 44). In discussing Acosta's work, Daves recorded that Acosta was a passionate and extraordinary writer who was never able to sell his work. She states that he was actually a prolific writer day and night, writing on napkins and toilet paper (*Bandido*, 48). But he was a poor businessman. Indeed, in a letter to an editor, a Miss Shrifte, Acosta offers to "sell" his unsolicited manuscript for the cost of postage, which after five rejections was $10. There is something sadly pitiful about this way of marketing his book. Nevertheless, his determination is clear. Because of his desire to succeed as a writer, Acosta begins a series of disappearances leaving his young wife and child without support. In fact, on numerous occasions he asked Betty for financial aid. Stavans notes that "Through postcards and letters filled with emotional power, he would tell his wife and baby son about his search for identity" (44). Committed to his dream of making his name known as a writer, Acosta did not allow even his wife and child to interfere. Stavans records that Acosta, "wrote everything he saw, everything he thought....He seemed to be looking for a theme to put his hands on, *un libro*, a book to write. Those that knew him at the time remember him as scribbling frantically. He needed listeners, needed to see his work published and thus began to send his manuscripts to editors as early as 1962" (*Bandido* 48). In his biography of Acosta, Stavans also writes that "Suddenly writing took center stage," but it is evidently clear that writing was always Acosta's primary obsession.

In attempting to show that Acosta has come to understand and accept

his Chicano heritage at the end of *The Autobiography*, we must ignore too many of the details presented in *The Revolt*. There is little progression of Acosta as an individual; he is a static character in terms of development and change. He seems no more committed to any movement or pursuit at the end of his second book than he does at the beginning of the first, with the shining exception of being a writer.

Scholars such as Padilla and Tatum have argued that Acosta's pilgrimage to his birthplace, to El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, serves as the center for his epiphanic realizations of self-knowledge and identity. They cite the passage where Acosta says "...I became a true son of the *indio* from the mountains of Durango on January 9, 1968" (190). The context of this revelation, however, is very telling, for Acosta makes his proclamation from "the bedrooms behind the 'Cantina de la Revolucion,'" from the bedroom, that is, of Anglo-looking, Mexican whores who are *gueras* or *rubias*. One has "red hair and peach skin," the other is blond. Even more remarkable is that this choice of companions has come just *after* Acosta has lauded the virtues of brown-skinned, black-haired, Mexican women as the "most beautiful" he has ever seen in his life. He writes that he had never found a woman to love, "But that first night out on the town, I saw at least a thousand I'd have married gladly on the spot...blinded with love...I knew they had the answer to my pain" (188-189). The sincerity of this statement is questionable at best. Acosta may wish he had these feelings, but the his actions do not substantiate his claims. Obviously it is ridiculous after this cathartic, epiphanic realization for Acosta to then chose two women who look Anglo. And this is not an isolated example. The truth is that Acosta was always obsessed with blonds; they are ubiquitous in his novels, and he never seems to overcome that attraction. Contrary to what has been stated by critics and by Acosta himself, the memory of Alice Joy and Jane Addison is never fully exorcized.

Since *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* is supposedly the work of an author who has recently found his true cultural identity and fully accepted his ethnicity, then there should be ample evidence of this change. There is, instead, the same appreciation for Nordic or Teutonic-looking women. Early in his second book, Acosta writes this aforementioned passage: "I was only anxious to find 'THE STORY'...so that I could split to the lands of peace and quiet where people played volleyball, sucked smoke and chased after *cool blondes*" (14, emphasis added). Whatever

happened to the "most beautiful" women he'd ever seen–the "brown women with *black hair*"? Throughout Acosta's autobiographical novels, he notices and comments on anyone with blond hair, male or female. In *The Autobiography* there is Alice with the short blond hair (16); "A young, short-haired blonde in jeans..." (37); "Young blond fags" (51); and Karin Wilmington with "Levis and long blond hair" (97). In *The Revolt* there is Dave Hurley with "blue eyes below blond hair," and a "blond reporter" among others. Even while in Acapulco Acosta comments on a blond with a blue bikini. Of the two women that Acosta ends up with in Mexico one of them, Bette, is a white "French whore." There is no evidence that Acosta has overcome his obsession with *las rubias*. In fact he admits that this "pattern stuck" (24). Brunettes however are never mentioned. He still privileges the Anglo-American ideal of beauty.

At least initially Acosta is something of an opportunist when he decides to align himself with the Chicano movement–something about which he knows little at first. As detailed at the end of *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, Acosta learns of the uprising in Los Angeles through his brother, Bob, who asks Acosta if he has heard of "Brown Power." Acosta replies, "You mean the Negroes?" To which Bob responds: "No, the Chicanos down in East L.A. I read a little paper called *La Raza*" (196). Acosta admits that he has never heard of them, but when he is told that they are going to start a riot, have a school strike, and foment a revolution in general, Acosta recounts this realization: "The bomb explodes in my head. Flashes of lightning. Stars in my eyes. I see it all before me. That is exactly what the gods have in store for me. Of course, why didn't I think of that" (196).

One type of autobiography is that which relates the discovery of a calling (Pascal) which is what Acosta does here, but his sincerity is questionable since his association was so short-lived. Nevertheless, Acosta's seminal discovery–with bombs, lightening, stars, and visions–is related differently at the beginning of his second book, where another weakness surfaces in the theory that there is a clear progression of identity, maturity, and the development of a social conscience. In conversation with his sister at the beginning of *The Revolt*, Acosta does not know anything about the Chicano movement in Los Angeles: "Then she begins to explain about some greasers, sort of like the Black Panthers, who are kicking up dust in East LA" (18). In reply to his sister's suggestion that he pursue

politics, Acosta says "I can just see a dope addict, a bum like me with all my vices, with my love of wild women and song, ex-Baptist missionary in Panama, ex-clarinet player, ex-peach picker-football tackle-parking lot attendant-lawyer, ex-everything, I can just see me running for public office." (17). At the beginning of his second book, then, Acosta knows nothing about the groups with whom he is to associate. He still shows a lack of identity with the group he will supposedly lead; he calls them greasers. The minor inconsistencies, if nothing else, show how Acosta attempts to lend these early events more importance than he actually should. He imposes significance retrospectively, but perhaps not honestly. Acosta maintains a distance from the Chicano militants. He refers to Chicanos as "the strange brown people" (29) indicating a lack of identification, and an emotional distance from them, which suggests that his involvement is initially that of a spectator. In fact, during his first demonstration march, when the police begin "...to arrest demonstrators with picket signs" Acosta says "I stand and stare. What can I do?" (34). His involvement is almost involuntary: "I am caught up with them. I march along..." (34).

Acosta's highly symbolic meeting with Cesar Chavez further helps to establish Acosta as a reluctant participant in the Chicano cause. Chavez tells him that the Chicanos need an attorney, but over and over Acosta replies that he does not want to be a lawyer; then reluctantly, almost against his will, he seems to be convinced. While some have tried to show that Acosta has found his mission in life at the end of *The Autobiography*, at the beginning of *The Revolt* he is still searching for a *raison d'etre*.

Another area in which Acosta seems to be lacking, is in his commitment to anything. Acosta shows a remarkable lack of staying power, a lack of real purpose. We should remember that at the end of *The Autobiography* when Acosta develops his plan to help liberate the brown buffaloes, he says, "and then I'll split and write the book." Further evidence of his weak commitment to anything is apparent in the many pursuits he has undertaken: music, math, missionary work, the military, Law, law enforcement, and the Chicano movement.

The unstable aspects of Acosta's character are visible in regard to his religious views and his use of chemicals: alcohol and "recreational" drugs. From *The Autobiography* we know that Acosta was a heavy drinker and drug user. But then while in the Air Force and during his stint as the

Mexican Billy Graham in Panama, Acosta is sober even though the guys in the band tempt him by offering women, cigarettes, and beer. As with everything else, however, he soon "gave up Jesus and the Baptist Church." He goes back to booze and women, but then in the beginning of *The Revolt*, Acosta has again cleaned up again: "For months now, I had been without booze and dope. No whiskey, no wine, no beer. No more acid or grass or hash ...my head had cleared. I could see again. I could find my story, then get fat again and live like a king. It's all a crazy circle, but here I am" (14). It *is* a crazy circle. Notice that Acosta merely intends to remain sober while looking for his story, and then plans to go back to his old ways. But his resolve does not even last that long, for soon after, he is on an acid trip. And if in fact he is sober on page 14 as he claims, by page 17 he has already drank five martinis with his sister. Incredibly, toward the end of his second book, there is a hint that Acosta may have tried to clean up again when he says that "He didn't know that he'd meet up with Jesus again" (281). On again, off again; that's our boy.

This same lack of resolve applies to his participation in the Chicano movement, for at first, at least, he is very reluctant to become involved as a participant much less as a leader. Initially Acosta wants involvement only as a journalist, and even when he decides to take up the cause of the Chicano movement, the commitment is short-lived. To repeat part of a previously cited passage: "...this afternoon, I have met my destiny...I decide to accept some of the misdemeanor cases... I figure it will take maybe three months to do the job. *After that*, I will *split* to Acapulco, write about the whole struggle and get in touch with my Chicano soul" (42 emphasis added). Note that his commitment is for *three* months. Note also, that he plans to get in touch with his Chicano soul *after* he splits implying that this has not already fully occurred. The literary critics who have written on Acosta attempt to show that this realization, this getting in touch with his ethnicity, has transpired at the conclusion of *The Autobiography*, but that is not the case, and it can be argued that it is never really fully manifested. These arguments also assume the essentialist view of identity, that it is fixed rather than in flux.

After Acosta more or less acquits the St. Basil twenty-one, he decides to "drop out again...maybe write an article..." (196). He also says that he has no commitments. Throughout *The Revolt*, Acosta is only half-heartedly involved with the movement; although he is quite involved with the legal

cases, it is for the sake of publicity. In fact, Acosta says that the most dangerous place one could be is between him and a camera. Throughout it all, he is something of an outsider. Those with whom he works sense his lack of complete commitment, particularly after his hiatus in Acapulco. Black Eagle feels that he has deserted the cause when they needed him most, and Acosta only becomes defensive.

If we can believe Hunter Thompson, he makes an important observation about Acosta in "The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat." Thompson argues that as a result of Acosta (whom he calls a fat spic) being jailed on drug charges, the Chicano movement lost all faith in him, and that even Acosta's own bodyguards did not believe his claims of innocence. Thompson thinks that all this negative publicity did irreparable damage to the "Brown Power Movement," which was "...effectively stalled, splintered and discredited...." Thompson asserts that none of the Chicano politicians liked Acosta to begin with, and so they denounced him as a "self-seeking publicity dope freak" who could not "rally friends or a following." Increasingly, Acosta was not permitted to defend those accused of taking part in militant activities in East Los Angeles: "...A dope-addled clown was worse than no lawyer at all." So Acosta "...beat a strategic retreat to Mazatlan...to lick his wounds and start writing the Great Chicano novel" (498-9). Although this may be an example of one liar calling another liar a "liar," some of what Thompson recounts is corroborated by the articles that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* (some of which Thompson quotes); there was a car chase and a drug bust, and Acosta was jailed more than once. In what seems almost an indictment from Thompson, he suggests that the political Chicanos in L.A. became dissatisfied with Acosta–to the point where they did not want his services even "for free." He had fallen from grace. All of this is, of course, left out of Acosta's account, where he pretends to be dissatisfied with *them*. He pretends to be the hot-shot lawyer that abandons them, not the other way around. Thompson's accusations help to dismantle the theory of Acosta as the great leader of the Chicano people in L.A. Furthermore, Acosta had little, if any, experience as a criminal lawyer. Straight out of law school he went to work as an attorney at a Legal Aid clinic. Some of the cases that Acosta handled in L.A. were for serious charges, murder and other capital offenses, and it is likely that with his inexperience he made more than a few blunders. And he has admitted that his legal training was indeed poor.

Thompson's dismissive treatment of Acosta may have other sources as well. Thompson appears as Stonewall in Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*. They had met the summer of 1967 in Aspen, Colorado as detailed in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*. According to Peter O. Whitmer's biography of Thompson, *When the Going Gets Weird*, "Thompson was only marginally the author of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*." For, "...when the real-life 300-pound Samoan attorney read the Las Vegas manuscript, he said to editor Alan Rinzler...'Hunter has stolen my soul! He has taken my best lines and has used me. He has wrung me dry for material'" (cited in *Bandido*, 99). Stavans suggests that "...the feud between Thompson and Zeta almost turned nasty but ended up with a fruitful bargain" (99). Although Zeta wanted half of the royalties from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and co-author credit, he settled for a contract for a two-book deal. Stavans argues that Acosta knew his books were being published not for their literary merit, "...but as a result of a legal deal between him and Straight Arrow Books..." (*Bandido*, 107). Stavans feels this exacerbated Acosta's inferiority complex and sense of being second-rate.

Although the friendship was patched-up somewhat, Acosta did write a letter to *Playboy* magazine, rebutting some remarks that Thompson had made about Gonzo journalism. On 15 October 1973 Acosta wrote:

> ...Doctor Duke and I–the world famous Doctor Gonzo–together we both, hand in hand, sought out the teaching and curative powers of the world-famous Savage Henry ...and in point of fact the term and methodology of reporting crucial events under fire and drugs...all this I say came from out of the mouth of our teacher who is also known by the name of Owl. (*Playboy*)

Acosta takes seriously these omissions about the origins of this form of journalism.. Acosta oscillates in his political pursuits and never fully overcomes his cultural alienation. For at the very end of his last work, Acosta says that for him "...this is a kind of end ...when I split the Chicanos..." (280-1). After his goodbyes where does Acosta go? "...for the bright lights and *white* women of San Francisco to write my swan song..." (281 emphasis added). He has had enough of the Chicano movement in Los Angeles for a while.

Throughout Acosta's work there is clear evidence of his commitment to writing, and less clear evidence about his commitment to anything else

except perhaps stirring up controversy. It is restrictive to force a particular reading of these two works as parts of one coherent whole. If one presents these two works as the evolution of a Chicano cultural and political hero, one is set-up for disappointment. The evidence to the contrary is too great. A much better view is to take both books as the product of a highly creative Chicano on a quest/ pilgrimage for self-understanding, adventure, and a good story to write about. The trouble with setting up Acosta as a leader and liberator of his people is that this overlooks Acosta's real contributions, for as a revolutionary, or even as a Chicano committed to a movement, Acosta fails. His real contribution is in the field of writing and autobiography; to this he has been committed, and at this he succeeds remarkably.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rodriguez As Whipping Boy

As a Chicano scholar with a specialty in autobiography, I have endeavored to read everything written by and about Richard Rodriguez and Oscar Acosta, not an easy task, since to date there are over a dozen doctoral dissertations and dozens of books, articles, and reviews that discuss their writing. In addition, each week Rodriguez publishes more work. I have heard him lecture on a number of occasions, and in July of 1999 I had opportunity of interviewing him in his small but fashionably-appointed apartment overlooking Alta Plaza in San Francisco. I fully expected a facade and a degree of intellectual posturing. But in two days of intense talking, I found only a surprisingly soft-spoken, and disarmingly candid, man who has thought deeply about what it means to be American and about some of the problems in our society. Although as a young man he argued with his father (who, incidently, died in 2001 at the age of 96) about the pessimism of Mexico versus the optimism of the United States, there is now a mild air of pessimism about Rodriguez, and it compliments his thoughtfulness and subtle melancholia. With time perhaps, he has become more like his father.

Today, Richard Rodriguez–an editor with the Pacific News Service, a contributing editor for *Harpers* and for *U.S. News & World Report*, and a weekly contributor to the *Los Angeles Times Opinion* section–is one of the most visible Mexican-American intellectuals and writers, due in large measure to his television essays on PBS's *NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer. Rodriguez confesses that these days he is most known for his television essays and less so for his books and journalism. Indeed, while at dinner with him one evening, we were interrupted a few times by admiring fans. Rodriguez has done two BBC documentaries, and in 1997 he won the George Foster Peabody award. He also won the Frankel Medal from the National Endowment for the Humanities and an International Journalism Award from the World Affairs Council. His book, *Days of Obligation: An*

Argument With My Mexican Father (1991) was nominated for a National Book Award. His third book titled *Brown* (2002) is shortly to be released. But Mexican-American intellectuals still know him best for his controversial first book *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (1982).*

Any discussion of Rodriguez' first book needs to keep in mind that he wrote most of the chapters of *Hunger of Memory* as separate essays while a graduate student. Thus this book is primarily the view of someone in his twenties–an age when one is still grappling with notions of identity, and an age in which one might attempt to impress others or prove one's worth–and it is important to keep in mind that nearly thirty years have passed since those not so halcyon college days. Rodriguez is now a secure, well-adjusted, mature man (born in 1944), some distance removed from the author of *Hunger of Memory*, a book that still creates controversy on college campuses–at least in my courses.

Raymund Paredes has noted that, "Probably no work by a Mexican-American writer has attracted so much national interest as Richard Rodriguez's intellectual autobiography..." (280). Ramon Saldivar suggests that Rodriguez "...has become in the span of a few years' time the voice of 'Hispanic America'..." (*Chicano Narrative* 155). Rodriguez has been written up favorably in such places as *The New York Times Book Review, The Los Angeles Times, The Village Voice, Harper's, the American Scholar, Commentary, Harvard Educational Review, Time, Newsweek,* and even *People* Magazine. Rodriguez's articles have appeared in diverse journals and magazines, including *The Wall Street Journal, Image, and Mother Jones.* Chapters from *Hunger of Memory* have also been widely anthologized in Freshmen composition readers. Yet, while mainstream America has lavished praise on Rodriguez's work, minority intellectuals and academics have been unanimously critical, if not scornful, of Rodriguez and his views on affirmative action, bilingual education, and cultural diversity. Lauro Flores, among others, considers Rodriguez "...a spokesman for the right wing of this country" ("Chicano Autobiography"). Interestingly, Rodriguez considers himself left of center.

The criticism and controversy on Rodriguez thus provides a growing body of literature that requires careful sorting and commentary because so much of it has touched the emotions and ire of others. It is a pity that most critics have chosen to center their discussion on Rodriguez's political

views, so that much of the autobiographical content of his work is scrutinized under the filter of affirmative action and bilingual education. This phenomenon may have resulted in part because of the disciplines in which early scholars and critics studied. Too often in the past, scholars from fields outside of literature were the ones writing. Perhaps a different sort of literary criticism would have formed had Rodriguez limited himself to telling the story of his life with less controversial political commentary. Of course, the argument is made that one cannot separate politics from life; nevertheless, politics takes center stage, and Rodriguez's anguished childhood often stands waiting in the wings.

Rodriguez has served as the favorite whipping boy of many Chicano critics who have been unified in their negative appraisals of his work. Mainstream reviewers, those who know less of the culture generally, have been kinder and more enthusiastic in their reviews. Tomas Rivera was one of the first Chicano scholars to address Rodriguez's autobiography. In "Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* as Humanistic Antithesis," Rivera concludes that the silence of Rodriguez's personal voice results from his desire to "...leave behind his Mexicanness" (9). As Rivera points out, the voice that Rodriguez cultivates later, what he refers to as his authentic voice, suggests that his Spanish voice was insignificant. For Rivera "...what is fundamentally the central element of the human being–[is] the cultural root, the native tongue" (6). But Rivera equates all that Rodriguez makes of silences, by associating them with things private and/or Spanish, with elements that are anti-humanistic. Rivera writes that Rodriguez "...concludes simplistically...that his personal voice is Spanish and that his active voice is English. Surely, this is a humanistic antithesis" (6). Rivera further believes that "...literature ...gives and inculcates...the fundamental original elements of humanistic endeavor without regard to race or language, much less with regards to a public voice" (7). Ironically, since so much minority literary criticism is socially and culturally based, Rivera feels that the humanities focus on original elements and values "...regardless of race and nationality" (7). Here Rivera attempts to depoliticize the humanities, divorcing them almost of time and place.

One of Rivera's criticisms of Rodriguez is that he disassociates himself from his native culture in order to more fully gain the "public world" (7). Again, we must ask ourselves, as Ramon Saldivar does, whether this change is conscious or unconscious (some will no doubt argue that it makes

little difference). Like Saldivar, who stresses the importance of community, Rivera posits this: "If Richard Rodriguez has hunger of memory, Chicano literature hungers for community" (11). Rivera thinks that the way to establish such community is "through remembrance and rediscovery of commonalities" (12). Nevertheless, Rivera himself argues that there needs to be an acceptance within this community of "all its heterogeneity" (12), but it seems that these ideas do not apply to Rodriguez and his egregiously individual work.

Rodriguez's pursuit of an education is something of an attempt to flee his past, his private self, his heritage. "This fleeing" according to Rivera, is "...a symbol of the pressures of the Americanization process" (8). To facilitate this process, Rodriguez turns his back on his cultural roots. Surprisingly, Rivera further believes that Rodriguez "...gives no value to the Hispanic language, its culture, its arts" (8). Although Rivera exaggerates his argument, if what Rivera says is true, it holds true only for a time, for in Rodriguez's second book *Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father,* Rodriguez emphasizes the importance of Mexico and Spanish in his own life and in the life of other Americans of Mexican descent. Of course Rivera died before Rodriguez's second novel was published.

Rivera takes Rodriguez to task for allegedly being dismissive of the Spanish language. Rivera argues that for Rodriguez, "...the personal Spanish voice lacks the intelligence and ability to communicate beyond the sensibilities of the personal...family life. This is intolerable" (8). Intolerable indeed, but also a misinterpretation of Rodriguez's claim. For Rodriguez and for his family, Spanish was not a language of intellectual discourse. For them as for many poor, and sometimes poorly educated Mexican immigrants, Spanish was the language of everyday discourse: not that they were incapable of philosophic reverie, but their concerns were often centered on economic survival. For Rodriguez, whose parents held humble jobs, Spanish was a private and intimate language, while English was the language of the public and educational sector. Although Rivera accuses Rodriguez of arguing that Spanish "has no redeeming value" (8), this is not corroborated by the text.

Because of Rodriguez's seemingly obsessive concern with skin color, Rivera feels that he exhibits symptoms of a "colonized mind," for "The colonial mind was preoccupied with color" (9). Rivera is critical because

Rodriguez "...worries about what or how he will be perceived by the 'Anglo'" (9). Rivera seems to feel that skin color is of little significance to society, nor that it should be to the minority, but a wide body of literature clearly shows otherwise. In work after work, writers are still highly concerned with those elements that distinguish them from others, elements which mark them as *other*. But for Rivera Mexicans' inferiority complex should have been overcome by the 1930s with the advent of Samuel Ramos' book *El perfil del hombre*. Ramos astutely argues that "...it is not that the Mexican is inferior: it's that he thinks he is inferior" (13). Rivera does not seem to understand that many minorities–and those who do not meet the rigidly narrow definition of personal beauty found on the television and movie screen–still suffer from poor self-images. Witness the popularity of hair-dyes, colored contact lenses, cosmetic surgery, tanning salons, health clubs, etc. So many, it seems, want to look different. Perhaps in *dyeing* their roots, they are in some way *denying* their roots. Those who still suffer these debilitating views are "extreme people" according to Rivera who also feels that Rodriguez does not acknowledge the "cultural uniqueness of his parents" (9); again, if this is the case in Rodriguez's first work, it is certainly not so in his second.

At one point Rivera asserts that Mexico has "accepted the mestizo" although he has previously shown that for Mexican families the skin color of their children is of utmost importance. Rivera discusses how a light-skinned child is considered a step forward, while a dark-skinned child is esteemed a fall back. In other words, the Spanish influence is still highly prized, while the indigenous element is still disparaged or denigrated.

In assessing a strength of Rodriguez's work, Rivera feels that it is representative of the effects "...of a North American education" (10), although Rivera feels that Rodriguez lacks an "...understanding of world culture; especially lacking is an understanding of the Hispanic world" (10). But fortunately for Rodriguez, his aim was never to delineate that world; his concern was elsewhere. Even so, it seems unusual to accuse someone as well-educated and as widely-educated as Rodriguez, of not understanding world culture. He may not, but he probably has an advantage over most others including Rivera himself.

Rivera lists several reasons for considering Rodriguez's work a "humanistic antithesis": because it is so narrow; because it is an aggregation of cultural negations; because Rodriguez seems unaware of the

traditions that should inform him; because he prizes what he learns in the classroom; because silence is presented as negative; and because only through English can Rodriguez elaborate what is correct and not correct for the community as a whole (13). Although some of Rivera's concluding points are not sufficiently developed in his essay, they do provide a basis for a defense of what Rodriguez does do in his work.

Ramon Saldivar aims some of these same arguments at Rodriguez. In "Chicano Autobiography," Saldivar asks, "...who would read another editorial on affirmative action? But who can turn away from an anguished denunciation of it by one who has benefitted from it?" (28). What Saldivar implies–that Rodriguez disguises another editorial on affirmative action by selling it as autobiography–is not exactly Rodriguez's impetus. His foremost aim, *is* to present his so-called journey from a disadvantage minority, to a supposedly fully-assimilated, semi-successful, American male, but his experiences with bilingual education and affirmative action do figure into the equation, not as major, but as minor variables.

Ramon Saldivar argues that Rodriguez's work is a "...journey from social disadvantage to social acceptance, from public alienation to public integration, from working class Mexican American to middle class white America" (27). But, as already shown, these conclusions are not wholly supported by the text. Although Rodriguez attempts to convince his readers that he is fully assimilated and has come to a sense of positive self-acceptance, this is not entirely the case. Furthermore why would someone be critical of those who want to avoid social disadvantage and public alienation?

One of Rodriguez's major dilemmas is that by adopting English as his primary language he is supposedly slowly and subtly being removed from the intimacy of his familial world in which Spanish is the spoken language. As he adopts English he is increasingly alienated from his culture and family. Saldivar notes that Rodriguez "...*chooses* with great anxiety and precious sadness to reject the duality of his working-class origins and his middle-class manners; he chooses to market his existential anguish to the most receptive audience imaginable: the right-wing establishment and the liberal academic intelligentsia" (27 emphasis added). Saldivar adds that in opposing Affirmative Action and Bilingual Education, Rodriguez is "in a political service to the Right" (27). But the question of intention and purpose remains unanswered, as does the question of Rodriguez' own self-

identification as a liberal.

One of the central problems for Saldivar, is whether Rodriguez *chooses* to "...assimilate without ever considering whether he acted by will or merely submitted to an unquestioned grander scheme of political ideology" (27). In other words does Rodriguez set out with a specific agenda, or does he more or less assume one through default? Saldivar astutely concludes that Rodriguez's stance is derived in part because of his views on individuality. In Saldivar's words, Rodriguez functions "...only as an isolated and private individual, deprived of any organic connection with his ethnic group, his social class, and finally even his own family. He is a solitary man, and he does not feel himself part of the social whole. Privacy and isolation are his essential features..." (27). This argument raises a central question: if Rodriguez is deprived of connection with his social class, to what social class exactly does he belong, and do all Chicanos and Chicanas belong to the same one? Part of Saldivar's criticism centers on Rodriguez not being a team player, on his not having a sufficiently developed social conscience, and on his insisting on being a solitary individual. Nevertheless, Saldivar notes something of a contradiction for "Rodriguez does behave like a public man" at times, in giving his bits of "contrition and confession," but Saldivar argues, these "are not moments of intimacy between the reader and [writer] but are rather like public *apologia* attempting to establish legal and moral justification of the public self he has chosen to be" (27). But can one so easily choose to be any public self one desires? Are there limitations to one's choice? Either Rodriguez is an assimilated middle-class American, or he is not. He may pretend to adopt a public (or private) self but the desire does not necessarily make it so. Rodriguez does cultivate a carefully manicured persona which he presents to the public. He writes his own version of his life. This persona, according to Saldivar "...is less the inner secret man he declares he wishes to present than the rhetorically highlighted, publicly apologetic voice of...the allegedly distinct private and public selves..." (27). So although Rodriguez presents his autobiography in something of the confessional mode, though certainly not to the extreme that Acosta adopts, Rodriguez's confessions are still carefully controlled. He discloses only so much in order to present the picture of himself that he has chosen. However in the autobiographical mode, as in any other literary mode, a complete disclosure is always impossible. No literary text exists without gaps. Each

writer must decided what to include and what will be left out, and consciously or subconsciously, an incomplete person is presented.

We must also keep in mind, that unlike Acosta, Rodriguez does not present his autobiography chronologically, but rather thematically with chapters on his education, complexion, religion, profession, and so forth. Because of this format, one must be careful in the criticism made about the *aporias*. What Saldivar criticizes, is that in Rodriguez's work no dialectic develops between the public and private figure. Furthermore, in Saldivar's view, Rodriguez "...implies that 'education' and 'society' stand against each other undialectically" (33). And according to Saldivar, "Autobiography is demonstrably capable of embracing both perspectives and putting them into dialogue..." (28). Rodriguez is taken to task for privileging the private over the public: "The social, political, historical world of bilingual education and affirmative action is illuminated only insofar as it relates to his private fate" (28).

Saldivar's sarcasm can be caustic because, according to him, Rodriguez attempts to "deny social or political significance" (28). Consider the remarkable tone of the following commentary about the conclusion of *Hunger of Memory*, the Christmas dinner during which Rodriguez's father has been quiet. Saldivar remarks that Rodriguez leaves "...alone and aware of his isolation, *ready to suffer for our* collective bilingually educated and affirmatively enacted *sins*, and equally ready to be reborn as the published autobiographer of assimilated middle-class Mexican America" (28 emphasis added).

Saldivar notes similarities between Christian hagiography, and Rodriguez's own story which is "...structured on the archetypal pattern of redemption" (28). Drawing on the work of William Spengemann, Saldivar asserts that Rodriguez's autobiography is "remarkably problematic" in three areas of self-representation: historically, philosophically, and poetically. For Saldivar, Rodriguez is "persistently uncritical" in his treatment of Mexican-American history. Although Rodriguez does discuss the "...connection between race and social status" he is criticized for overlooking the "...subtleties of the relation between a dark complexion and a life of poverty" (28). Perhaps Rodriguez has overlooked this because while his own skin is quite dark, he is not living in poverty. This leads Saldivar to address the second area in which Rodriguez's autobiography is problematic: because the story "...lacks the verisimilitude of auto-

biography's second demand: philosophical self analysis" (28-9), because Rodriguez has failed to consider, "that the author lives, moves and has his being in historical projections..." (29). But autobiographies have innumerable demands, most of which cannot be addressed. Saldivar faults Rodriguez for failing to place "his private life in public history" (29). Instead Rodriguez has attempted to maintain the division between these realms.

Saldivar's third argument is that this autobiography "suffers as a poetic self expression" because it is offered as a "pastoral" a "kind of literature that draws a contrast between the innocence and serenity of the simple life and the corruption and chaos of urban life" (29). A similar criticism could be leveled at William Wordsworth. Saldivar follows this up with a detailed paraphrase of Paul de Man's "Autobiography as De-facement" without sufficiently discussing Rodriguez's work. To other readers part of *Hunger of Memory*'s strength lies precisely in its poetic power. Rodriguez is clearly master of the metaphor. His prose is painstakingly crafted, and the pastoral voice usually rings true. Rodriguez's enrollment at various universities served as just that separation from the work-a-day world. He was to some extent cloistered in the ivory tower, perhaps through no desire of his own, or perhaps as an escape from the difficulties of an ethnic childhood.

Saldivar's concern with Rodriguez is that the "... relationship Rodriguez establishes between the self he offers in his book and the self outside the book, as between those 'private' and 'public' roles he ascribes to us all, is fundamentally open to question" (29). The implication here is that there is but one relationship between private and public selves and that Rodriguez has not offered the correct interpretation. Although Rodriguez may mislead his readers, consciously or unconsciously, I doubt if there is only one relationship between the private and public person. A better argument, and one Saldivar does make, is that there is little dialogue between these distinct voices, or personages. Saldivar takes the approach that most critics have taken: in disagreeing with Rodriguez politically, they fail to give sufficient analysis of the text, arguing instead about the context.

Five years after the publication of Saldivar's article, he published *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*, in which he adds to his earlier article by enlisting Gramsci to suggest that "Autobiography can be conceived 'politically'... [it can] therefore replace the 'political' or philosophical essay'" (155). The question might then be asked if it is

possible to write an apolitical autobiography. Rodriguez's works can certainly be viewed as political tracts–it's just that the politics of Rodriguez differ from those of Saldivar.

Another critic, Shirley K. Rose, writes about the myth "that literacy is a means for achieving individual autonomy," something that is strongly implied by Rodriguez. Rose notes that "For Rodriguez, acquisition of literacy brings about not only autonomy, but...alienation from his family and their Chicano culture" (8). In other words "Rodriguez found in his literacy skills the means by which he could change his life" (9). Rodriguez clung to the belief that "...literacy would integrate him into public life" (10). Indeed throughout his autobiography Rodriguez has maintained that he had to choose between the private and public world: the either/or fallacy. Rose writes: "He asserts that this alienation is necessary and unavoidable. He claims that everyone must sacrifice his private identity in favor of his public identity and that this sacrifice is a necessary and natural part of maturation, not just for the minority working class child, but for everyone who wishes to achieve a sense of autonomy and individuality" (10). Although Rose is quick to assert that this need not be the case for everyone, Rodriguez certainly felt that this was the way for him. Rose interprets this dilemma as a choice between "cultural identification" and a "...desire for gaining access to the power of middle class identification" (10). Is it unfortunate that so many young people today make this same choice? Rose feels that Rodriguez "...identifies himself with the middle class culture most clearly when he adopts its myth that literacy is positive, for it gives one autonomy" (11). Well, what does illiteracy give one?

In "Chicano Autobiography: Culture, Ideology and the Self," Lauro Flores suggests that the central proposition of autobiography is to "...elucidate the relationship between culture, ideology and individual/group identity and consciousness..." (83). Taking as a base V.I. Lenin's views on minorities within "a pre-socialist multinational Russia," Flores argues that it is not an "us" and "them" polarity–a minority group against a monolithic dominant society–but rather there is a "dual ideological content of each...of those cultures, the dominant as well as the dominated ones" (83). Flores invokes Bakhtin by insisting that "...the dialectics of culture and ideology...operate, *dialogically*...within the realm of Chicano literature (83). Flores sees as a mistake the view that "...all Chicano writings...necessarily express a class ideology that runs against the grain of

the hegemonic classes" (83), and Rodriguez is the case in point. There is therefore no such entity as "*the* Chicano problem." One must instead examine Chicano culture "in its various levels and modalities, as the social activity of specific individuals..." (83). This is no doubt the point of view Rodriguez wishes other critics would take, but it is not the stance taken by Saldivar and Rivera who place community over individuality.

After noting the similarities between Rodriguez and Ernesto Galarza, Flores writes, "...one would surely expect both men to expound, if not the same, at least similar ideologies" (84). Flores notes the striking differences between the two writers in social and political outlooks. Since both writers are part of the minority and alienated culture "...one would expect them to adopt cultural perspectives and ideological stances running against the grain of those conservative views..." (84). Flores is one of the few who addresses this question, others seem puzzled that Rodriguez is so different from other Chicano intellectuals.

Nevertheless, like Saldivar, Flores feels that Rodriguez is "...a spokesperson for the right wing of this country" (85), whose autobiography is part of a "...calculated strategy to disarm the reader, [and] is also part of this overall and apparently self-imposed conservative program" (85). Flores quotes Arturo Madrid as another who feels that Rodriguez's agenda is primarily political, the autobiographical impulse being secondary or tertiary. Many, if not most, critics have called into question the sincerity of the title. Does Rodriguez actually hunger for those memories of a pastoral youth where romantic strains of soft Spanish filled the air? Flores feels that the clever title is "...undoubtedly part of an astute marketing strategy" because, for him, it "...leaves a certain ring of incongruence and falseness" (86).

Although most scholars who have turned a critical eye toward Rodriguez's book, have commented on the allusion to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, or more specifically to the figure of Caliban, Flores wisely notes that "Rodriguez's appropriation of the master's discourse functions...to defend and to preserve that very order which the real Caliban[s] question and threaten with their demands for reforms such as affirmative action and bilingual education" (86). Rodriguez would have even more fully adopted the master's discourse had he completed his doctorate, but he allegedly chose not to.

Like Rivera, Flores agrees that Rodriguez's work lacks "historical

perspective." Interestingly, however, Flores does not feel that Rodriguez's case is all that unique. Instead of actually depicting himself, Rodriguez "...reaffirms and reinforces the myths of individuality and social upgrading opportunities; myths so pervasive in [our] society..." (85). This argument is similar to the one Shirley Rose put forth. Rodriguez is taken to task for compromising, for renouncing the "...very right to diversity and [instead] to advocate assimilation..." (85). Rodriguez gives up his desire to maintain his diversity and instead succumbs to the pressure of conformity by assimilating into the dominant culture. I have argued that Rodriguez, in spite of what he professes, never fully becomes the middle-class American he hoped to become; he remains isolated, aloof, and alienated from both cultures.

Ironically most critics who respond to Rodriguez's work often do so because he dares to upturn the stereotype that not all Mexican Americans share a monolithic world view, a view that is reductive and limiting to an immensely complex and diverse culture. Rodriguez has been chastised for choosing education and upward mobility in place of his family and culture. And while the argument is made that elitists aspire to the middle or upper middle class, the proletariat chooses merely to abolish or overturn the middle class, which in effect brings the proletariat up in status–the end result being somewhat similar. No one however consciously desires poverty and powerlessness. Yet Rodriguez is ostracized for overtly aspiring to gain the tools of the middle class.

My esteemed colleague, W. Lawrence Hogue notes that "Richard's conscious decision to repress his working class Mexican American past and to become the exception and succeed as a scholarship boy costs him enormously. It cuts him off from his parents" (55), and, it may be added, from the Chicano community. Some of my students take Rodriguez to task for "abandoning" his parents, for supposedly being ashamed of his parents. The truth is that Rodriguez became his parent's primary care-giver, more so than his other three siblings. Rodriguez moved his parents to within a few block of his small San Francisco apartment, and he was a source of their support. Nevertheless, the Mexican American community which has been hostile to Rodriguez has ironically been indirectly instrumental in Rodriguez's notoriety. According to Hogue, "He, as a Mexican American, is a celebrity because he opposes those people of color and women who threaten the stability and sanctity of a Western, White, male-dominated

literary canon and tradition" (63). None of these have arisen from the status quo to stand and defend the lost sheep's individuality. None have been able to put aside Rodriguez's political views. Hogue takes to task the Chicano cultural nationalists "...who make an ideology of working class Mexican American culture and then proceed to define Mexican American social reality and all Mexican American experience against that ideology" (53).

As a case in point, Genaro Padilla distills the issue to one of "cultural loyalty," but again the subtle implication is that there is a monolithic Chicano community that thinks and feels alike, and that what is good for one is good for all. In *My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography*, Padilla refers to Rodriguez as one "who has publicly disaffiliated himself from his culture so as to assume the mask of the 'middle-class' American" (35). Again the assumption is that all Chicanos and Chicanas should be cultural nationalists and that to aspire to anything else is to sell out. Admittedly, not supporting social programs that may help the disadvantaged may be grounds for criticism, but merely climbing the social ladder should be a different matter altogether. Rodriguez's narratives "...may be read as culturally self-denying texts... because of cultural confusion" (37). This cultural confusion, however, is widespread. Witness the proliferation of works on Chicano/a identity. This confusion exists even in Mexico where the Spanish influence is simultaneously hated and admired, and the Indian is both esteemed and disparaged.

These are not the only critics to have written on Rodriguez, however, and at the conclusion of the next chapter a discussion of some of the more positive critics will be presented.

Will This Monster Make a Man?

"I have taken Caliban's advice," begins *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982). "Once upon a time [beginning in fairy-tale fashion] I was a 'socially disadvantaged' child." The implication is that he no longer feels disadvantaged. And though he has, by his own account, succeeded at assimilating into middle-class America, he yet sees himself as something of a monster. "Dark-skinned" (3), he writes, offering those two words as one of his primary concerns. Because of his dark skin he asks

"...will this *monster* make a man" (italics added 3).

Rodriguez grew up painfully aware of his ethnicity, in part because of his dark skin. This pigment he feels, set him apart from mainstream America. Through his studies at Stanford, Columbia, Berkeley, Union Theological Seminary, and the Warburg Institute, he was, like Caliban, able to appropriate language for his own use. Although Rodriguez presents himself as "a middle-class American man. Assimilated" (3). Careful attention shows that he still struggles with notions of inferiority, and there is evidence that he uses language as an attempt to compensate for his ethnicity.

In the epic tradition of the hero going forth into the world leaving behind, or rejecting, family and country, *Hunger of Memory* delineates a breach that will be somewhat repaired in his subsequent works, *Days of Obligation: An Argument With My Mexican Father* (1992) and *Brown* (2002). In discussing his surname, Rodriguez writes that he carries it from his "...parents–who are no longer my parents, in a cultural sense" (*Hunger* 4). Furthermore, he writes of having no particular interest in Aztec ruins. He criticizes those who, seeing that he is "marked by indelible color" suppose that he is "unchanged by social mobility," and that he claims unbroken ties with his past (5). Rodriguez suggests that he *is* changed by social mobility; yet this supposed rise in stature has come at great cost: the loss of his parents and culture and primary language. He considers the separation from his parents a loss. Many have questioned the extent and sincerity of this pre-occupation, this loss. Rodriguez realizes the peculiarity of his situation; he knows that he is considered "a comic victim of two cultures" (5). He writes that at least in reference to his politics he is considered a coconut, turncoat, *vendido*, "a dupe, an ass, the fool–Tom Brown, the brown Uncle Tom" (4). Like Acosta, Rodriguez disarms the critics by beating them to the insults and calling himself these names. He preempts their arguments by showing that he is already aware of their views.

Although Rodriguez presents his autobiography as "...the life of a middle-class man" (7), it is in essence his struggle to become middle-class and leave behind his past. Like many minorities, before and since, Rodriguez has thought carefully about his status in society and thus has learned that his culture is not generally esteemed by the dominant group. He realizes that the very shade of his skin makes him "socially dis-

advantaged" (12). Initially his immigrant parents viewed this country as the land of opportunity, and it was only when they came into contact with the dominant culture that tension developed. Many immigrants assume they can have the best of both worlds and remain unchanged in fundamental ways. They also sometimes assume that they will be welcome in the melting pot of America, until someone tells them, "Keep your brats away from my sidewalk!" (12). Sadly Rodriguez acknowledges that "...any feeling of ease, the confidence of 'belonging' in public was withheld from" his parents (12). Rodriguez subconsciously concludes that prejudice and racism can be lessened only through integration.

Rodriguez relates a story of being deeply embarrassed by his father's broken and labored English while talking to a young gas-station attendant: "I tried not to hear anymore...Shortly afterward...I shivered when he put his hand on my shoulder. The very first chance that I got, I evaded his grasp and ran on ahead into the dark... (15). His sense of shame is evident in this somewhat painful passage that depicts Rodriguez shunning his father's embrace and by extension his culture. All too clearly the young Rodriguez is learning to equate his heritage with this sort of pain and embarrassment, and so he distances himself. Writing retrospectively, Rodriguez says, "I am tempted now to say that none of this mattered. In adulthood I am embarrassed by childhood fears" (15). But of course it does matter and is still of concern.

Rodriguez is careful to make distinctions between the public and the private sphere, between his home and the world. He emphasizes that he "...was an extremely happy child at home" (17). The emphasis is necessary because we would not otherwise be entirely convincing. His discomfort occurs when he or his family comes into contact with the mainstream culture. In their private world, there is no sense of "otherness" or inferiority, but at the crossroads of cultures "the pain of public alienation" (18) occurs. He refers to this as "the clash of two worlds" (20).

In his youthful naivety, Rodriguez felt that language was his only obstacle to assimilation, for when he masters English he feels that, "At last, seven years old, I came to believe what had been technically true since my birth: I was an American citizen" (22). Furthermore, he is extremely pleased "...that a teacher had said [he] was losing all trace of a Spanish [read Mexican] accent" (44). "Soon" he becomes "as Americanized as [his] classmates" (79). But the more proficient he becomes in English the more

alienated he feels from his Spanish-speaking parents. Certain Spanish words are "painful reminders of how much had changed in [his] life" (24).

Rodriguez paraphrases (and identifies with) Hogarth in writing that the scholarship boy "...cannot afford to admire his parents. (How could he and still pursue such a contrary life?) He permits himself embarrassment at their lack of education. And to evade nostalgia for the life he has lost..." (49). His argument, however, is somewhat flawed, for he asserts that education must necessarily distance him from his parents and culture, and, of course, thousands of minority "scholarship boys" have shown otherwise. This is another example of the either/or fallacy which suggests that one cannot have *both* an education *and* close family ties.

Although Rodriguez might not agree, the separation he endures has probably been voluntary. Eventually as English becomes his first language he refers to his days of speaking Spanish as "the golden age of [his] youth" (26). He seems to parade a false, or unfelt, sense of memory. He avows: "I evaded nostalgia. Tried hard to forget" (50). Acquisition of the English language, he feels, is what finally makes him American and allows him to "...seek the rights and opportunities necessary for full public individuality" (27). Rodriguez underscores this idea, his thesis: "*...a primary reason for my success in the classroom was that I couldn't forget that schooling was changing me and separating me from the life I enjoyed before becoming a student...* (45). Rodriguez himself adds the italics to emphasize his realization; yet, he is less emphatic about his desire to succeed. Subconsciously or not, he felt that unless he became "less of a minority" through education and language, he was doomed to suffer discrimination throughout life.

In his discussion of the scholarship boy, Rodriguez writes that "He has used education to remake himself" (65), to become something else. He confesses that "...one chooses to become a student. Education is not an inevitable or natural step in growing up" (48). If education is not inevitable, then neither is assimilating. Thus Rodriguez chose to endure the separation from his parents in order to succeed scholastically if not socially and economically. He thinks that "...those uneducated and poor will remain most vulnerable to racism" (150). He returns to this refrain later, stating that "...what most deeply, daily, concerned me during those years: I was growing away from my parents" (180). He also claims to have written autobiographical articles "...to praise what [he] lost" (189), but at times the

praise gets lost in the (veiled) criticisms. So, after briefly mourning the loss of Spanish, he sings the praise of English: "My story," he writes, somewhat pessimistically, "...discloses instead an essential myth of childhood–inevitable pain. If I rehearse here the changes in my private life after my Americanization, it is finally to emphasize the public gain" (27).

Although Rodriguez refers to the pain of childhood as myth, he attempts to convince the reader that his assimilation is his gain, but that this gain is not without its own pain. He acknowledges that because of ethnicity and language he "...grew up victim to a disabling confusion" (28): a confusion others might call an inferiority complex. In high school he could no longer speak Spanish: "A powerful guilt blocked my spoken words...I would manage to utter halting, hiccuping sounds that betrayed my unease" (28). That is quite some guilt. In essence, this loss of language makes of him a *pocho*–the Mexican-American who, in becoming an American, forgets his native society" (29). Once he masters English he comes "...to feel guilty" because he has "...shattered the intimate bond that had once held the family close" (30). He refers to this as "the original sin" against his family. He tells us that this is still something he "broods" about. Later Rodriguez will argue that this intimacy is not a result of language. Intimacy comes from other sources.

After the nuns from his school encouraged his parents to speak English at home, Rodriguez discloses his anger toward his parents for forcing English upon him. Forgetting Spanish may have been his way of punishing them subconsciously. Later he seems to be angry with them for not trying more diligently to improve their own English speaking skills. Although his mother once asks him for a book to read, Rodriguez is hurt when weeks later the book remains unread: "I was furious and suddenly wanted to cry"(52). He seems to be overreacting, but this shows how important he viewed books and reading and education. He is disappointed at what he perceives to be his mother's lack of ambition. He had hoped she would make greater effort to study and read in English. "I was not proud of my mother and father," he continues, mirroring the views of some scholarship students, "I was embarrassed by their lack of education...they were not like my teachers" (52). When he hears his father talking with his teacher, he "...felt ashamed of his [father's] labored, accented words. Then guilty for the shame. I felt such contrary feelings" (53).

These contrary feelings are a key to Rodriguez's personality. He wants

things both ways: He wants both to love his parents as they are, but since their speech embarrasses him, he also wishes they were more at home with English. He is also critical of their reading habits: "Never did I see either of them read an entire book. Nor did I see them read for pleasure. Their reading consisted of work manuals, prayer books, newspapers, recipes" (58-59). So instead of the company of his parents and family he learned "...to enjoy the lonely good company of books" (62). In contrast to his parents, he readily confesses that he idolized his teachers (49), and in quoting Richard Hoggart he writes that the scholarship boy "...tends to make a father-figure of his form-master" (49). Rodriguez tells not only that he "planned to become a teacher someday" but that he "...wanted to *be* like [his] teachers, to possess their knowledge, to assume their authority, their confidence, even to assume a teacher's persona" (55). The young Rodriguez clearly replaces his immigrant parents with school teachers on the road to becoming the assimilated middle-class American.

In spite of receiving minority scholarships and fellowships, Rodriguez distances himself from other minorities at school. He claims to have "awkwardly carried the label" (143). This is a consequence of his excellent Catholic schooling. At first he accepted and believed the label and the notion that he was socially disadvantaged. Later he realizes that his superior education distinguishes him from other minority students and even poor white students. He writes "I was not a cultural minority" (151). He went so far as to publish essays "...admitting that [he] was not a minority" (153). Rodriguez feels fully capable of competing academically with Anglo-American students; he does not need special advantages, though initially he took them by way of scholarships and financial aid. Later he becomes uneasy about "...becoming the beneficiary of affirmative action" (148). "One Mexican-American said I was a minority whether I wanted to be or not" (148), but Rodriguez asserts that "All Mexican-Americans certainly are not equally Mexican-Americans" (150).

When he received job offers that none of his fellow students received, Rodriguez says he felt compelled to reject all offers because of the unfairness of affirmative action. But there are some possible contradictions here, for if he felt that he was just as capable as others because of his exclusive schooling, then why not accept the offer? If education is what elevates him above the sweaty proletariat masses, then why not take the doctorate–presumably one of intellectual-society's highest honors?

Ironically, Rodriguez might not have felt qualified; he could not actually believe that the academic positions offered were based on merit; he felt the offers were based merely on his ethnicity, in spite of his distinguished academic and publication record. There are, of course, other possibilities to this situation. The truth is that Rodriguez never finished his dissertation–something quite common. Perhaps he spent so much time contemplating his ethnic navel and writing essays asserting that he was not a disadvantaged minority, that he just never got around to finishing his treatise on genre in Renaissance literature.

The most telling section of Rodriguez's book is the one titled "Complexion." As quoted earlier, Rodriguez writes that "Nothing else about my appearance would concern me so much as the fact that my complexion was dark" (125). His mother imposed this concern about his pigmentation. We are also told that his aunts "spoke of their pleasure at having light children" as well as their "fear of having a dark-skinned son or daughter" (116). One aunt, in fact, "regularly called her dark child *mi feito* (my little ugly one)" (116). In *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez relates that "Mexican mothers wish for light-skinned children. Touch blond hair and good luck will be yours" (14). In describing his summer, he writes about his mother scolding him for becoming so dark:

> 'You look like a *negrito*,' she'd say, angry, sorry to be angry, frustrated almost to laughing, scorn. 'You know how important looks are in this country. With *los gringos* looks are all that they judge on. But you! Look at you! You're so careless!...You won't be satisfied till you end up looking like *los pobres* who work in the fields, *los braceros*.' (*Hunger* 113)

Rodriguez inherits at least part of his self-view from his mother who (mis)teaches him the importance of looks and skin color. When he takes a summer job doing yard work, his mother instructs him to work after dinner, when the affects of the sun are lessened, and to wear a hat. She increases his preoccupation about his color, so that for years he cannot fully enjoy himself outdoors as others did. When as young as seven, and while at a public swimming pool, his mother would call out to him to put a towel on his shoulders (124). Rodriguez felt envious of his older brother who had "...skin that burned red and peeled like the skin of the *gringos*" (115). In high school this brother had girlfriends who seemed glamorous to Rodriguez because they were blond (114-5). Only one other sibling, like

Richard, was also dark-skinned: "...she found her dark skin a burden. I knew that she suffered for being a 'nigger'" (115). This fear was revealed only later, in adulthood, when, "...she quietly admitted relief that [her children] were all light" (115-116).

Although his parents prize light-skinned children, they promote a sense of confusion. For while they encourage their children toward pride for their heritage, they esteem certain elements of the dominant culture. For example, Rodriguez's "mother and father scorned those 'white' Mexican-Americans who tried to pass themselves off as Spanish" (115), and yet we know that they are pleased with those very features that make one look "Spanish." They send a mixed message, and their scorn for "white" Mexican Americans seems to stem, in part, from envy. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Rodriguez stated that if an Anglo were to have come to the Rodriguez's door during the preparation of dinner, his mother would have run to the kitchen to put lids on all the pots, so that the visitor would not see that the Rodriguez's ate different food from the Anglos. Ironically, some 40 years later, the Anglos are all eating Mexican and Tex-Mex food. What message did this act send to the children about their ethnicity and culture? –hide the difference.

Though Rodriguez occasionally received confusing signals from his family, outside the home the signals were clear in the form of racial slurs: "Hey, Greaser! Hey, Pancho!" Another boy states "matter-of-factly, 'I pee on dirty Mexicans'" (117). These complicated factors all combined to reinforce "...the shame and sexual inferiority I was to feel...because of my dark complexion" (124); "I felt my dark skin made me unattractive to women" (125), he tells us. And later: "Fifteen, sixteen, I was a teenager shy in the presence of girls. Never dated. Barely could talk to a girl without stammering. In high school I went to several dances, but I never managed to ask a girl to dance. So I stopped going" (127). He tells that he grows "divorced" from his body: "I wanted to forget that I had a body because I had a brown body" (126). On three occasions Rodriguez alludes to feeling effeminate in part because of his feeling of sexual inferiority, but also because "education was making me effeminate" (127). He further wonders whether his "...nostalgia for sound...was nothing more than effeminate yearning" (129). And finally he feels "...that there was something unmanly about [his] attachment to literature" (129). Later at Stanford, he claims to have had "something like a conventional sexual life" but that he never

"...really believed that...women...found him physically appealing," so he continued "to stay out of the sun" and he "didn't linger in mirrors" (130).

Of course all this obfuscates Rodriguez's sexual proclivities, for along with his ethnicity, Rodriguez is further marginalized because of his sexual orientation. He thus becomes a double minority. In *Hunger of Memory* there is only a brief reference to what Rodriguez calls "America's last niggers": homosexuals. This sexual orientation, later acknowledged, no doubt contributed to his sense of alienation and further reinforced his sense of difference. In *Days of Obligation*, he writes: "As racism rhetorically replaced poverty as the key social oppression, Americans learned to look beyond class in considering social oppression" (149). In the case of homosexuality "...it became more and more difficult to distinguish the middle-class victim of social oppression from the lower-class victim" (150). This implies that in terms of social advantage there are similarities between ethnic minorities and homosexuals which form another oppressed group.

But getting back to the question of insecurities and feelings of inferiority, one of the most painful scenes in *Hunger of Memory* occurs when Rodriguez attempts to lighten the color of his skin. One evening when he is 11 or 12 years old, he locks himself in the bathroom and, without pleasure, looks at his dark skin in the mirror. In an effort to eradicate the color, in an attempt to lighten his skin, he takes a straight razor and attempts to shave off the brown. In his mind he hears "...the swirling voices of aunts, and even my mother's voice, whispering... incessantly about lemon juice solutions and dark, *feo* [ugly] children." But "...the dark would not come out. It remained. Trapped. Deep in the cells of my skin" 124-125). This passage, vivid and painful, perfectly depicts his concern with that feature that most distinguishes him from Anglo-Americans. Though fully aware of his pigmentation, he tells of the difficulty he had with an art class assignment to draw a self-portrait because he could not bring himself "to shade in the face" (125).

Rodriguez, however, would like us to believe that there is a happy ending to this saga though it does not occur until the end of his senior year in college. Rodriguez surprises himself by taking a job working construction like a *bracero*. He learns to work without his shirt, wantonly exposing his skin to the sun, recklessly allowing himself to turn darker. This experience helped him overcome some of the shame he had associated

with his pigmentation; this became the summer of his liberation, when finally the yoke of "...physical shame was broken...I was no longer ashamed of my body. No longer would I deny myself the pleasing sensations of my maleness...I was able to regard my complexion without shame" (136). He tells us that he now revels in the sun, and that he took up long-distance running. Though he had long equated dark skin with *braceros*, discrimination, and poverty, the summer of construction work made him realize that some of the construction workers were middle-class college-educated Americans. But he also seems to equate physical labor with manliness. He makes this assertion which is supposed to convince us of his self-acceptance: "...my complexion assumes its significance from the context of my life. My skin, in itself, means nothing" (137). He continues, "That summer...may have made me physically indistinguishable from the Mexicans working nearby...But I was not one of *los pobres*. What made me different from them was an attitude of *mind*, my imagination of myself" (138). But in the minds of passers-by he is still just another Mexican digging a ditch. Which brings us to the point that feelings of inferiority –though seemingly stemming solely from external sources–are equally produced from within the imagination.

In relating how education has changed him and distinguished him from other Mexican immigrants, Rodriguez writes of the benefits of higher education: "I could act as a public person–able to defend my interests, to unionize, to petition, to speak up–to challenge and demand" (*Hunger* 138). Yes his education will help him, but his features will continue to single him out as *other*. Notice again how dismissive he is of difference. Notice how he attempts to convince himself that he is not different, that he is assimilated, that he accepts himself fully. All these concerns remain with him and resurface in his next work. For Rodriguez the real changes occur on the inside. He notes that ghetto girls, though able to "mimic high fashion models," will probably always be ghetto girls, for the changes they have made are merely superficial. Commenting on young, black, body-builders, Rodriguez writes: "Against a powerless future, they engage images of strength" (137).

For Rodriguez, the strength necessary to change things, to matter, is not a physical strength but an intellectual one. He feels that not "all blacks are equally 'black'" (150) just as "All Mexican-Americans certainly are not equally Mexican American" (150). Those who are poor and uneducated

"...will remain most vulnerable to racism" (150). Rodriguez also provides this: "My relationship to many of the self-proclaimed Chicano students was not an easy one. I felt threatened by them. I was made nervous by their insistence that they still were allied to their parents' culture" (159). Here, Rodriguez adopts an "us" and "them" posture. "He" came to campus singly, "They" came in groups, he tells us. He came submissively, "willing to reform [himself] in order to become 'educated.' They were proud, claiming they didn't need to change by becoming students" (160). He distinguishes himself from other Mexican-Americans whom he claims are culturally more Mexican-American than he. Finally, he says that he "...was glad to get away from those students..." when he was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to London. But even though Rodriguez acknowledges that he is "...not the best person to evaluate the Third World Student Movement" as he puts it, he has increasingly become the voice of Hispanic America by appearing on "A Dialogue on Race" with President Bill Clinton, being interviewed on Bill Moyers' *World of Ideas*, being an essayist on the *NewsHour*, being interviewed on National Public Radio, and of course lecturing on college campuses and bookstores as an expert on matters germane to other Latinos–many of whom, incidently, resent him deeply.

Rodriguez maintains a distance even in regard to his father. For example, when his father uses "we," Rodriguez mentally corrects him: "*We*, he said. But he was wrong. It was he who had never had any chance before" (172). His mother has also felt this separation because she asks him not to write about how "divided" he feels from his family (175). This separate stance, however, is inconsistently adopted, for at times he considers himself apart from the Chicano/as around him, while other times he affirms that he must always wear his ethnicity like a dark shroud while bemoaning the loss of an "enchantedly happy" (3) ethnic upbringing. These inconsistencies extend to such matters as his professed envy of those who worked with the disadvantaged at barrio clinics or legal aid centers, like Acosta. He also claims to envy their fluent Spanish, but in other instances he has asserted that there is no particular bond between language and the past or poverty.

Yet when extended an opportunity to teach Mexican-American literature, he, in fact, argues somehow against ethnic literature, against the literature of the poor. "I didn't think that there was such a thing as minority literature. Any novel or play about the lower class will necessarily be alien

to the culture it portrays" (161). For this stance, he was labeled a coconut: brown skin, white views. Rodriguez relates that his Chicano students would glare at him in fear of ever becoming like him (162). Then, still feeling apart, in this case from both cultures, he ponders: "Who was I, after all, but some comic Queequeg, holding close to my breast a reliquary containing the white powder of a dead European civilization?" (162). He admits also that his intended audience is a well-educated gringo (182). And here then is Rodriguez's dilemma: to the Anglo culture at large, he is the Caliban monster, forever trapped by his "disfiguring" ethnicity. But because of his education, he feels different from those of his own heritage; to them he is a comic figure if not a traitor.

In reading the conclusion of *Hunger of Memory*, one compelling question comes to mind: why did Rodriguez turn his back on academia, on the job offer from Yale University? In a letter his mother tells him to not punish himself for having given up "...his culture in order to 'make it'..." (178). Though we can do nothing but indulge in biographic conjecture from the distance, it seems that for Rodriguez to have accepted the offers, when none of his colleagues had similar opportunities, would have been tantamount to acknowledging that he was, indeed, a disadvantaged minority who needed special patronage to succeed, and this all along is what he argues against. Since he argues so eloquently that he is not a minority, that he is not disadvantaged, it seems that the best way around this semantic problem is to acknowledge that intellectually he may be no different than his Anglo colleagues, but pigmentation-wise, and in profile, he will always be marked as different. Yet the similarities are only intellectual, for Rodriguez relates examples of friends' home lives, with something of a gasp. After his knock on their door, someone yells, "come in it's open." The father is in his underwear, the mother in a bathrobe, quarreling in "public," children scolded in front of him; he was in fact, treated as family. Yet none of these things would have occurred in a traditional Mexican home. The easy familiarity of the Anglo culture will always be somewhat alien to Rodriguez. In contrast to them, Rodriguez writes that in his home visitors would never have been treated as part of the family; they would have been received with a degree of formality, "an aristocratic reserve" (184).

Hunger of Memory ends with scenes of Christmas and with the Rodriguez family gathered for festivities around the supper table. The

father has finally asked him a question, and Rodriguez comments: "It is, I realize, the only thing he has said to me all evening" (195). With that sentence the book closes, underscoring one of the author's themes: education has changed him, has separated him from his family. The father's question was in fact: are you going home now, too? The father is aware that emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and culturally, Rodriguez's home is elsewhere. This is the loss, the separation that Rodriguez thinks he has endured. This unity of home, life, body, and spirit has become a lost Eden. The fruit which led to this loss was indeed the fruit of knowledge. And that lost Eden is what creates the so-called hunger of memory.

CHAPTER SIX

Rodriguez: Days of Controversy

Soon after *Hunger of Memory* appeared, Rodriguez was suddenly surrounded by minor-league celebrity status. He was in demand as a speaker at luncheons and at universities. According to the media, here was someone who wrote honestly, if painfully, about what it was to be a minority. Because of Rodriguez's opposition to affirmative action and bilingual education, and because he was a minority that had excelled in academia, Rodriguez was touted as something of a model minority, although against his own wishes, for he continually asserted that he is not a role model, that he is not a spokesman for any group. Instead, Rodriguez argues that he is a solitary individual who can only speak for himself and for his own experiences. The reality is that continually and increasingly Rodriguez shunned the title "minority." In a 1992 interview with Bill Moyers on PBS' *World of Ideas* Rodriguez asserts that he is an American, that he is a Yankee, that he is not a minority. Of course he also claims that because of his precociously early reading, he also experienced what it is to be Armenian, Black, Chinese, Jewish, and so forth.

In *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez controversially states that he is no longer socially disadvantaged, that he is now a fully assimilated middle-class male who wears expensive Italian suits and English shoes in acknowledgment that he is "the dandy." He also carefully chronicles the progression of his self-esteem by pointing out that the "curse of physical shame was broken by the sun; I was no longer ashamed of my body...I was able to regard my complexion without shame" (136). Yet, a decade later, in *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, he carries the same cultural concerns. He is still obsessed with complexion and identity. Consider the first sentence of chapter one: "I *used to* stare at the Indian in the mirror. The wide nostrils, the thick lips...Such a long face–such a long nose–sculpted by indifferent, blunt thumbs, and of such common clay" (1 emphasis added). Notice the use of tense, "*I used to* stare at the Indian," the implication being that he no longer cares or worries about his physical features, but there he is, at the most prominent place in

his second book, the beginning, regarding his image in the mirror and contemplating his ethnicity and his relationship to mother-Mexico. In asking: "Where, then, is the famous conquistador?" Rodriguez answers "we have eaten him with our eyes," and then this telling sentence: "I run to the mirror to see if this is true. It is true" (24). Rodriguez implies that because his features resemble the Indian–something evident because they and their genetic codes are more numerous than the Spanish–they have finally conquered the Spanish conquistadors. They have internalized the Spanish, incorporated them, and ultimately diluted them into a *mestizo*. Yet, as Rodriguez has carefully shown, Indians have survived by being passive, adapting, stoic and "willing to marry, to breed, to disappear in order to ensure her inclusion in time" (24). Ironically, their success was by default.

Rodriguez's second book, like his first, is primarily a volume of previously published essays, which however have not received the critical attention that was focused on his first collection. There is very little literary criticism about *Days of Obligation* although, no doubt, there will be additions to this field each year as more and more scholars turn to Chicano/a autobiographies.

What Rodriguez does–or attempts to do in *Days of Obligation*–is to relate the contemporary history of Mexicans, while at the same time delineating some of the differences in outlooks between Mexicans and Anglo-Americans, primarily those from California. *Days of Obligation*, like *Hunger of Memory* is filled with personal, autobiographical reflections. In his second book, Rodriguez still assumes contradictory poses: asserting that he is culturally not a Mexican, while simultaneously showing how his culture still retains a hold on him. In *Days of Obligation*, he again draws a minor parallel between Caliban and Indians.

The publication of Rodriguez's second book adds another dimension and a remarkable irony to the comparisons that can be made between the works of Acosta and Rodriguez. Both writers recount scenes of self-scrutiny and introspection in front of the mirror, but there is another feature that these writers relate. Oscar Acosta's autobiography begins with this cathartic scene: With my large, peasant hands carefully on the rim of white...I stare into the repository of all that is unacceptable and wait for the green bile...I strain to vomit, pushing upward with my diaphragm (*Autobiography* 12). When Acosta is able to vomit, he notes the colors, red in particular. Rodriguez renders his scene: "I am on my knees, my mouth

over the mouth of the toilet, waiting to heave. It comes up with a bark. All the badly pronounced Spanish words...bits and pieces of Mexico spew from my mouth, warm, half-understood, nostalgic reds and greens dangle from long strands of saliva" (xv). Acosta and Rodriguez both seem to contemplate what they have regurgitated. Acosta considers his colorful vomit a form of creation or art. Further study shows that this vomiting, this purging by both authors might be similarly induced because they are both at odds with their lives. In Acosta's case, in that particular scene, he is unhappy with his ulcer-inducing job as a Legal Aid attorney, while Rodriguez is somehow unable to make Mexico palatable: both are spewing what they can no longer stomach. Symbolically Rodriguez seems to reject Mexico by purging himself of any last ties.

Rodriguez acknowledges that he has been "A man who spent so many years with his back turned to Mexico" (*Days of Obligation* xvi). For years he has been unable to come to terms with his roots, indeed with his identity. He refers to this syndrome generally as "a divorce between Mexico and California..." (xvii). Education and a degree of status are not enough to completely transform Rodriguez into a middle-class assimilated male. And though he disclaimed, in his earlier work, being a disadvantaged minority, in his subsequent effort he finds that, unlike clothing, culture is not so easily shed: "The youth of my life was defined by Protestant optimism." He writes, "Now that I am middle-aged, I incline more toward the Mexican point of view..." (xvii). This statement comes after devoting an entire book to showing how he has been severed from his primary culture and language by education, and after he has argued that he is not a minority. Rodriguez polarizes Mexico and California to the masks of tragedy and comedy respectively; he refers to this "argument"–between the countries and between him and his father–as "...this tension that describes my life" (xvii).

In *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez sets out to create a reverse immigration trip. Since his father migrated from Mexico to California, Rodriguez will travel that path in reverse, returning out of a sense of obligation to what he calls, in his introductory chapter, "My Parents' Village." This village however turns out to be a town selected not in reference to the lives or history of his parents, but rather for the imagination of the camera crew that accompanies Rodriguez in order to shoot a BBC documentary primarily for a British audience. This "village of childhood imagination" is chosen from the point of view of an American childhood,

and with a foreign audience in mind, and is really only what Rodriguez calls "*My* vision of the Mexican village" (xix emphasis added). In other words, Rodriguez invents for himself, and for a distant audience, something of a stereotypical Mexican village; he constructs for himself a mythical Mexican past: one that he does not know, one that has no basis in reality. Obviously Rodriguez could have selected the village from which his parents actually immigrated, but presumably it was not sufficiently picturesque, so Rodriguez takes license with history. In doing this, Rodriguez is guilty of giving the audience what it wants, what it presupposes about life in a Mexican village.

The "tension" that Rodriguez admits to feeling is less a result of the philosophical outlook of Mexico, or of any particular argument with his father, but instead a result of being a Mexican-American in a society that though perhaps in *word* celebrates individuality, in *deed* requires homogeneity and conformity from its constituents. Rodriguez's dilemma, or tension, results from perceiving himself as different from the norm. In *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez confesses to being infatuated, or "...taken by the symbols of leisure and wealth" (136). He continues that for his parents, who were similarly taken in, "...those symbols became taunts, reminders of all they could not achieve in one lifetime. [But] For me those same symbols are reassuring reminders of public success" (136). Rodriguez is perfectly clear about his love of fine clothes and the accouterments of bourgeois pretense. One can speculate that this led, in part, to his ambition, his desire to assimilate and succeed. He takes his parents on a grand tour to Rome, as evidence of his sophistication, his "...easy way with the world ...My father should have been impressed" (*Days of* 201). Then this unusual disclosure: "I tempt vulgarity to be reassured. I am filled with the gaudy delight, the monstrous grace of the nouveau riche" (136-137). This supports one of Octavio Paz's theories on the costume of California *pachucos*. Paz believes that *pachucos* are ashamed of their origin and so adopt the zoot suit as a mask. They are "...afraid of a stranger's look because it could strip them and leave them stark naked" (13). Paz writes that "...the *pachuco* actually flaunts his differences" (14). Paz calls this "...grotesque dandyism an anarchic behavior" (14). In costume Rodriguez does not ascend to the heights that the *pachucos* in their day did; yet it is useful to consider the photograph of Rodriguez that graces the back cover of his second book. The profile of him prominently displays his nose that he has already

described for us in each of his books, but this picture of him also accentuates a remarkably dark face albeit with something of a small scowl; he proudly wears his ethnicity like a badge. The sun's effects are further exacer-bated by a more than slightly dark photograph. In this picture he is burned much darker than the portrait that adorns the cover of *Hunger of Memory*. What Rodriguez does, in fact, is to, "display his difference," to highlight his ethnicity, to call attention to his "Aztec" roots, for someone once commented that "...it must be cool to be related to Aztecs" (*Obligation* 2). Paz implies that because mainstream society refuses to fully accept the *pachucos*, they rebel and accentuate their difference. Since Rodriguez cannot pass for an Anglo-American–in spite of his long years of schooling and his assimilation–he instead tans himself as a gesture of rebellion. In *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez himself quotes from Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, though of course Rodriguez does not acknowledge similarities between himself and pachucos. In his first book, his most acerbic criticism is aimed at a "dainty white" lady, who has the audacity to say that it is a shame that he is unable to use his Spanish in school: "...how dare her lady-fingered pieties extend to my life!" (4). There is more than a note of resentment here. Since he certainly looks Mexican, why can't he speak Spanish, she wonders? She has questioned why he does not fit her stereotypical view of his kind. Rodriguez resents someone attempting to take his individuality away by lumping him into a larger category. Furthermore, Rodriguez has refused to accept the sometimes popular notion that being of Mexican descent necessitates knowledge of Spanish. He feels that many Chicanos have embraced the Spanish language as the acid-test of ethnicity, as their membership card. Rodriguez does not lend such importance to Spanish.

On one occasion during a lecture at a university a student demanded that Rodriguez speak to her in Spanish instead of in the language of the oppressor, English. She was irritated that he could not or would not respond in Spanish. Later Rodriguez ruminated about this episode; he pointed out that Spanish too is the language of the oppressor. The native populations in Mexico were colonized by Spanish conquerors. Indians speaking Spanish in Mexico is similar to Chicano/as speaking English in the U.S. since both languages are tongues of imperialistic colonizers. This woman, then should have perhaps addressed him in the Aztec language of *Nahuatl* for she is doing little more than privileging one conqueror's language over another's.

As an aside, in Mexico City "...one reference to the 'immortality' of Spanish was altered with spray paint one night, with 'Spanish' replaced by 'Nahuatl'" (Riding 27).

Clearly, Rodriguez does not think much of all that is associated with the mother tongue. In *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez recorded the story of a Chicano who tells him "'I would never give up my family language; I would as soon give up my soul.' Thus he holds to his chest a skein of words, as though it were the source of his family ties. He credits to language what he should credit to family members" (35). Rodriguez explains how proletariat men eager for political power and in effort to unite with or rally others would call each other "brother" or "comrade." But using these words does not convey intimacy which goes beyond mere political rhetoric. For Rodriguez the intimacy associated with family language has more to do with the family and with the intimacy of home than it does with language. Any language can become a public language, and intimacy may be attained in any dialect. He maintains that Mexican-Americans have tried to make language something of a holy grail, the proof of ethnicity. Rodriguez argues that he does not learn much about language or intimacy while listening to "...social activists who propose using one's family language in public life" (37). Once this *family* language enters the public arena it ceases to have the same intimate utterance.

Furthermore, Rodriguez has argued that in order to enter into the Anglo-American world, in other words, in order to succeed, children must make the transition to the public language; like Caliban, they must master the tongue of the dominant group though Rodriguez does not argue that this must be done at the expense of Spanish or any other mother-tongue. Nevertheless, Rodriguez has acknowledged that he either forgot or suppressed most of his Spanish language skills. His ability to speak Spanish was blocked by a powerful guilt (read shame). In *Distant Neighbors* Alan Riding has argued that "The language of public life essentially mirrors the language used by Mexicans in their day-to-day relationships" (17), and that "Formal and obscure language is probably the Mexican's prime weapon and self-defense" (16). In Mexico, he continues, "...language has a life of its own, almost as if words rather than people communicated with each other...Excessive frankness or directness is considered rude" (16). Although Rodriguez does not pursue his discussion of private and public language, for him the reality lies in the different ways in which language is employed

within different cultures and within different economic classes.

In discussing family unity in Mexico, and the intricacies of the Spanish language, Riding also notes that the house itself is emblematic of this unity and intimacy. "The high walls that surround most Mexican homes, including frequently those of the poor, serve as both real and symbolic frontiers of security and authority" (13). Rodriguez's upbringing in the United States has removed him from these elements so that it is easier for him to minimize their importance.

Language is one distinguishing feature, but physical appearance plays an equally important role in the identity formation of minorities. In *Days of Obligation*, the epigraph to chapter one, "India," is from Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca who notes that the Indians "sent their women and children to look at us." Rodriguez has grown accustomed to being looked at, even questioned about his looks. In *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez argues that complexion assumes its significance from a particular context. As an example he relates that a "...registration clerk in London wonders if I have just been to Switzerland" suggesting that he is tan because he has been skiing. But obviously Rodriguez is aware that a different interpretation would be given were he to enter the same hotel through the service entrance. Then this defense: "My skin, in itself, means nothing...I know there are people who would label me 'disadvantaged' because of my color...I was not one of *los pobres*. What made me different from them was an attitude of *mind*, my imagination of myself" (137-138). Yes, his imagination of himself, but how might others regard him *vis-a-vis* his skin color?

In *Race Matters*, Cornel West relates some experiences where his education or even his costly clothing did little good. Despite education, or the accouterments of wealth, one is still judged, that is, prejudged, by skin color. Professor West writes of trying to get a taxi in New York City: "I waited and waited and waited. After the ninth taxi refused me, my blood began to boil. The tenth taxi refused me and stopped for a kind, well-dressed, smiling female fellow citizen of European descent. As she stepped in the cab, she said, 'This is really ridiculous, is it not?'" (x). But the difficulties in getting a cab, though bad enough, do not measure up to the indignities West suffered at the hands of a police officer. West relates "...I was stopped on fake charges of trafficking cocaine. When I told the police officer I was a professor of religion, he replied 'yea, and I'm the Flying

Nun. Let's go nigger!'" (x) On another occasion, arriving a little early to give a lecture, West was told to go get more chairs, under the assumption that he was the janitor, not the guest of honor! Rodriguez's assertion that education can raise one above the disadvantaged poor is usually correct, but it assumes that one will be given an opportunity to speak, or that one's credentials will be inspected, and too often this in not the case, and so one is still (pre)judged merely on the basis of a first appearance .

In *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez continually presents himself as a "middle-class American man. Assimilated" (3). A decade later the argument is that cultural roots may not be so easy to pull up, because "Mexico was not interested in passports; Mexico was interested in blood. No matter how far away you moved, you were still related to her" (57). We find that his imagination of himself may not be exactly what he first described. His assertions at least become less confident. In fact he acknowledges the confusion spawned by the complexity of two countries and cultures living side by side and yet a century apart (Rodriguez quips that Mexico is, in some ways, still in the nineteenth century, in the Victorian era). In Mexican Spanish, he writes, *Mestizo* means mixed, confused. Mexico's two constituents are still at odds, still deliberating about identity and loyalties. This is visible in what Rodriguez calls "the complexity of my face" (1). But Mexico also refuses to acknowledge the Chicano, or more commonly the Mexican-American, according to Rodriguez: "Mexico would not entertain the idea of a 'Mexican American' except as a fiction, a bad joke of history...We were still her children" (59). While the Anglo-American and the Mexican wear different masks, to return to Rodriguez's metaphor, so do the Spanish and Indian. One of the philosophical themes in Mexico regards Indians' fatalism, Indians' passivity. Rodriguez records that "Mexicans imagine their Indian part as deadweight: the Indian stunned by modernity; so overwhelmed by the loss of what is genuine to him–his language, his religion–that he sits weeping..." (2). In Mexico the Indian forms the under-class who "...must play the passive role. Europe has been accustomed to play the swaggart in history–Europe striding through the Americas, overturning temples, spilling language, spilling seed, spilling blood" (8). Furthermore, "In private...*indio* is a seller of Chicklets, a sidewalk squatter. *Indio* means backward or lazy or lower-class...[yet] Mexico raises a magnificent museum of anthropology–the finest in the world, to honor the Indian mother" (14).

Thus within Mexico there is this giant contradiction: public acknowledgment versus private scorn. Similarly, Martin Luis Guzman has derogatorily written:

> Since the conquest...the Indian has been prostrate, submissive, indifferent to good or ill without conscience, his soul reduced to a rudimentary grain, incapable even of hope...the Indian has not taken a step forward in centuries. Without idealism, hope or aspirations, feeling no pride in its race, overcome by some mortal and irritating docility, the Indian mass is for Mexico a weight and a burden. (290)

The Indian stoops near the bottom of the social ladder.

Ironically, in the U.S., at least in Houston where I live, the local television stations take great pains to have a rainbow of news-anchors: We have Asian, Black, Chicano and of course Anglo TV news-anchors locally, but in Spanish-language TV nearly all the news-anchors look "White," Spanish or European. Ilan Stavans once quipped to me that Mexican TV personalities are more blond than Americans. Alan Riding argues that Mexico has not built a "...public monument to Hernan Cortes...the father of Mexico–the rapist" (13). "Mexico [takes] its national identity only from the Indian, the mother...Mexico equates barbarism with Europe–beardedness–with Spain" (12). When Mexican President Lopez Portillo, who was proud of his Spanish ancestry, unveiled a bust of the conquistador in the Hospital de Jesus there was a great deal of controversy, but the next year he again placed another monument to Cortez in the main square of Mexico City which stood until he left office, when it was promptly removed "...to the delight of local nationalists" (*Distant Neighbors* 24). Riding points out the contradiction, the love/hate relationship that Mexico has with the Indian. He writes that Mexico is supposedly "Proud of its Indian past, [but]...ashamed of its Indian present" (287). Riding also notes that: "An intensified search for a national identity led to idealization of the Indian, first through the murals of Jose Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros and later in museums and folk art" (290). Publicly the Indian is celebrated while the Spanish is deprecated. Privately there is another matter altogether.

In fact, Rodriguez notes that 300 years after Cortez, "Mexico declared herself independent of Spain. If Mexico would have no yoke...then Mexico would have no father" (*Days of Obligation* 14). Hating and yet admiring the oppressor serves to complicate the Mexican psyche. "Mexico is littered

with the shells and skulls of Spain, cathedrals, poems...But everywhere you look in this great museum of Spain you see living Indians" (23). Though not often publicly acknowledged, the Spanish influence is certainly secretly praised, emulated, and desired.

Mexico herself, has borrowed something of that "lowly" status from the Indian. Rodriguez writes of being "...repelled by Mexico's association with the old. On the map...Mexico was designated OLD MEXICO. In my imagination, Mexico was a bewhiskered hag huddled upon an expanse of rumpled canvas that bore her legend: Old Mexico" (209). Though bordering on the United States of America, Rodriguez finds "...the distance between the two countries to be farther than any map could account for" (202). He received a disclaimer from his mother: "'Do not judge Mexico by the poor people you see coming up to this country.' Mexico had sky scrapers, pyramids, blonds" (214). But the Anglo-American's view usually limited. Many see only the poor, uneducated migrant worker. They see only those who were forced north by economic necessity, by lack of opportunity.

Rodriguez puzzles over other seeming contradictions. As a youth in California, he observed homesick farm workers on foreign soil celebrating a weak vestige of Mexican holidays. With their dust-coated lungs, dampened only partially by a beer or two, they shouted, they cheered: "VIVA MEXICO!" Rodriguez asks "Why VIVA MEXICO? The country that had betrayed them? The country that had forced them to live elsewhere?" (*Days of Obligation* 53). Even as a Catholic, Rodriguez felt that he had somehow transcended being a Mexican by becoming Irish: "I was a Mexican teenager in America who had become an Irish Catholic" (166). Later he adds: "I was born to America, to its Protestant faith in the future" (219).

Within Mexico the two major cultures are at odds with each other, both are whimsically esteemed and shunned almost simultaneously. But take the Mexican national, that curious amalgam, north of that arbitrary border, and the Mexican becomes "...scorned on land he had named. Spic. Greaser. Spanish, the great metropolitan language, reduced to a foreign tongue, a language of the outskirts, the language of the gibbering poor, thus gibberish; English, the triumphal, crushing metaphor" (64). In the United States, the Mexican takes the position of the poorly esteemed Indian. The Indian becomes that distasteful "other." While part of Mexico's success lies in the consorting of the two groups, resulting in what has been called, by Jose

Vasconcelos, the "cosmic race," in the United States this sin is considered miscegenation. The Puritans always remained apart, and therefore "uncontaminated" by the natives.

In the United States, the immigrant "...is supposed to perch on a hyphen, taking only the dose of America he needs to advance in America" (159); otherwise he is guilty of betraying his country, his roots. If immigrants fall into the melting pot they "...will find [themselves] a stranger to [their] parents, a stranger to [their] memory of [themselves]" (161). Rodriguez feels there is no middle road; he feels that one cannot assimilate *and* maintain one's cultural roots, again, the "either/or" fallacy. The loss that results from assimilation, Rodriguez blames on the classroom: "...language is not just another classroom skill...Language is *the* lesson of grammar school" (163). In other words, tied to the English language taught in American schools, is the American culture itself. This idea leads Rodriguez to suggest that "Grammar-school teachers forged a nation" (163). By teaching the various immigrants English, these teachers helped unify and build the country. "The classroom will teach us a language in common. The classroom will teach a history that implicates us with others. The classroom will tell us that we belong to a culture" (167). "I entered the culture as you did," he writes, "by going to school" (172). The immigrant children go to school supposedly "simply...to acquire the skills to 'survive' in America. But the child returns home as America. Foolish immigrant parents" (173).

Yet, contrary to this argument, some immigrants *have* somehow remained perched on that hyphen. Rodriguez uses Huck Finn as an example of a child who assimilates through education, calling him "the archetypal bilingual child." This bilingual-ness includes Huck's particular language and his unique culture as well. But changes wrought by language supposedly come as a loss to Rodriguez. How, he asks, "...shall we describe Americanization, except as loss? The son of Italian immigrant parents is no longer Italian. America is the country where one stops being Italian or Chinese or German" (164). Or at least that was the idea traditionally, when most of the immigrants were of European extraction. Now the bulk of newcomers, notes Rodriguez, do not speak European languages, nor do they worship European Gods, nor is "the shape of the meat they eat identifiable" (166). Nevertheless, at least in regard to the Asian immigrants, the protestant work-ethic has gone amok; they are "...more protestant than

Protestants; so hardworking, self-driven; so bright" if "culturally more foreign" (166). Rodriguez devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of "Asians" in *Days of Obligations*, who along with the Mexicans comprise the largest wave of immigration.

Traditionally, in this country we all become the bland soup served tepid from the melting pot. Variety and spice gradually diminish until we become a thin homogenized European broth. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Rodriguez said that the melting pot is not only inevitable but necessary. Becoming American implies a violence, a scalding, an alchemy, a chemical change. These days, however, there is a new metaphor. The ingredients do not blend as well. Large chunks of beef try desperately to remain undissolved in the soup. In *Days of Obligation*, Rodriguez writes that "Sushi will make us lean, corporate warriors. Mexican Combination Plate #3, smothered in mestizo gravy, will burn a hole through our hearts" (171). Rodriguez presents the notion of "...diversity" as merely a new cliche to say of the immigrants that "they are not us–the Protestant creed" (165). In fact, the more diversified America becomes, "...the less inclined to claim a common identity" (168).

Ultimately, *Days of Obligation* does little more than further the arguments that Rodriguez has already developed in *Hunger of Memory*. He uses his second work, in part, as a rebuttal to much of the criticism he has received. As an individual he remains mostly static. As a writer, he continues to use language and metaphor brilliantly. His observations remain keen. I beg the reader's indulgence in allowing a characteristic example of his prose. After describing the Mexican psyche, and to draw a contrast to Anglo-Americans, Rodriguez writes that America is best viewed at a restaurant that is open 24 hours alongside a freeway. The waitress, who is divorced, and whose hair is not the same color as at her last job,

> ...is the priestess of the short order, curator of the apple pie. She administers all the consolation of America... Your table may yet be littered with bitten toast and spilled coffee and a dollar tip. Now you will see the greatness of America. As one complete gesture, the waitress pockets the tip, stacks dishes along one strong forearm, produces a damp rag soaked in *lethe* water, which she then passes over the Formica.
>
> There! With that one swipe of the rag, the past has been obliterated. (54-55)

In contrast, if he were to show us Mexico, he writes that he would have to

take us home where the mantel is crowded with family pictures, where the odor of cooking beans floats in the air, where outsiders are greeted formally and kept at arms-length (55).

Such poignant observations, and there are some on every page, place Rodriguez high up on the list of essayists and literary stylists. In spite of the many detractors, several scholars have championed Rodriguez for his prose. In "Between Two Worlds" Donohue notes that Rodriguez's writing is more than merely political. "It tells a straightforward story with a moving simplicity and in a style that has the lightness and clarity which can only be achieved by a scrupulous care for words. The title itself is rather arty...this book is a pleasure to read because it has actually been *written*–not just poured off the top of the author's head..." (403). Another defender of Rodriguez, from the point-of-view of the prose at least, is Antonio Marquez who praises Rodriguez for shifting his autobiography from historiography to literature. In reviewing the aspersions aimed at Rodriguez, Marquez writes that Rodriguez,

> ...has amassed these experiences and explored with eviscerating honesty the pull of assimilationist forces ...In brief, he has taken a common experience and given it the shape of literary art...Moreover he is an exceptional stylist...I contend that there is a level of artistry...that should not be shunted simply because Rodriguez does not meet the Procrustean bed of "cultural awareness" or any other ideology...its ultimate value lies in its literary qualities...To read him is not to read sociology or history, but rather a literary construction...Rodriguez's [books are] closer to the poetics of...Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* than to the sociohistorical forms of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or to Galarza's *Barrio Boy*. (132-133)

Of course Rodriguez's concerns and style perhaps stem from his long studies in English literature. His autobiographical writings value literature over "sociocultural propriety" to quote Marquez. His writings form a bridge between autobiography and literature. In reference to Rodriguez's prose, Marquez writes that

> ...his chiseled sentences subtly expand from simple declaration to a lyrical and philosophical manner that is sustained by poetic image...[in] Rodriguez's prose...one can discern the carefully balanced sentences, the measured pacing, and the sharp images give a rich texture to his memories and the momentary recapturing of time past... He wraps ordinary experience around exceptional cloth. (139)

Rodriguez, then, writes a *kunstlerroman* rather than a *bildungsroman*; his experiences are recorded from the point-of-view of a highly self-conscious literary artist.

Nevertheless the critics are less interested in Rodriguez's proficiency at prose than in his peculiar politics. Although most writers give at least a nod to Rodriguez's style, some of them have questioned the manner in which he "fetishizes" language. Villanueva-Collado, for instance, relates his experiences in studying the unreliable narrator in Rodriguez' book:

> ...I had the impression the book was founded on a series of illogical leaps, carefully hidden within a deceptively simple, even elegant, style...when I was able to show [my students] the manipulation of language and thought present in the text [they] eagerly undertook an analysis of it. [Rodriguez}...wants to ensure the reader, by means of language, into a world-view that the reader himself rejects. (90)

In "An Unresolved Modern Experience: Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory,*" my esteemed colleague W. Lawrence Hogue begins by arguing that *Hunger of Memory* "breaks with prevalent styles of perception of the past with the hope of creating a new style" (52), and in so doing he "...rejects the values and conventions of the historical past and promise[s] new life" (53). Hogue feels that Rodriguez's "...break with community, family, or the working-class Mexican American past is the radical impulse that stands behind his 'genuine humanity'" (53), an assertion not shared by most critics. For Hogue,

> *Hunger of Memory* revolts against bilingual education, Affirmative Action, and Chicano cultural nationalists because they assume a definition of Chicano or Mexican American culture that excludes its narrator's subjective lived experience. [but] It also revolts against the majority White society for its inability to see a Mexican American as an individual and for seeing Mexican Americans as constituting a monolithic, homogenized group. (53)

Nericcio notes that "Rodriguez's writing does more than just document the discord of one Chicano intellectual's life. By fetishizing the efficacy of his single, unitary, homogeneous voice he...denies the harmony, discord and plurality of other Latino voices" (179). Yes, Rodriguez has maintained an intellectual and cultural distance from Chicanos, but to what extent this

is a function of his use of language remains unanswered. Rodriguez has vigorously resisted the tendency to be lumped in with the community, while acknowledging that the government increasingly lumps all Latinos together. In an essay published in *American Scholar* Rodriguez laments that, "Palm tree or cactus, it's all the same; Hispanics are all the same. Puerto Ricans, Central Americans, Cuban Americans–all are becoming Hispanic" (176). Rodriguez is critical of this over-simplification, this melting down of individual identity, and yet his detractors have been critical of him for not being a team player, for refusing to relinquish his identity to that catch-all phrase "Hispanic." There is a big difference between an Argentinian and an El Salvadorian, yet a Hispanic could be Spanish, Indian, Cuban, Black, Mexican, American, Caribbean, Central American, South American, and so forth. The cultural differences are too vast to be encompassed by a single term.

Ultimately, *Days of Obligation* lacks the unity and cohesion found in *Hunger of Memory*. His latter work is even more apparently a collection of previously published essays. And while *Hunger of Memory* was also patched together from previous publications in journals, it maintains a stronger sense of integrity that is lacking in *Days of Obligation*. In spite of the ten years separating these works, however, there are similar concerns. Rodriguez still argues his point about public language vs. private language though he adds an interesting new dimension by discussing the masks of comedy and tragedy that he attributes to America and to Mexico respectively. In *Days of Obligation* Mr. Secrets does come out of the closet, acknowledging his homosexuality, but aside from that there is little that is new. Nevertheless, Rodriguez continues to be a remarkable writer, a sensitive observer–if with a jaundiced eye–of life around him. Let me end this chapter by quoting a book review by John Donohue, wherein he gives this high praise: "There is a good chance that [Rodriguez] will still be read a century from now. [He] will have survived, however...because his history of that life has something to say about what it means to be an American, what it means to be a Catholic and what it means to be human" (*America* 404). Ultimately, the controversy that Rodriguez invoked helped keep Chicano literature on the syllabus. Parts of his first book are still read, discussed, and debated by thousands of college students. Long after the debate over affirmative action and bilingual education is cold, Rodriguez's poignant prose and personal observations will still ring out loud and bold.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Resolving Controversy

What then do we conclude about these two controversial writers and their four works? Although some of the conclusions that will be made here have application only to Acosta and Rodriguez, many of them also apply to a larger subject, not only Mexican-Americans, but other minorities as well. What should be obvious by now is the great anxiety and solipsistic concerns that sometimes result when one ethnic group comes in contact with another. These individuals see themselves as occupying space, a borderland, between two cultures and several decisions are required about language, culture, identity, assimilation, and so forth. Even something as seemingly simple as the desire to fit-in can be a remarkable force: peer pressure has been well documented. Because of the incredible, often insidious, influence wielded by the dominant group, choices are not easily made. Choice can be undermined. This cultural influence exerts its pressure directly and indirectly. The desire to fit-in too often leads minorities to assimilate by adopting norms often in opposition to their own cultural indoctrination. Rodriguez is an extreme example of this.

Both Acosta and Rodriguez are aware of the unique construction of the Mexican psyche: one that is comprised of a contradictory past and of an uneasy history. Because of the contrasts and contradictions between the Spanish and the Indian, because of the *mestizaje* that occurred, Acosta and Rodriguez have inherited an identity dilemma. They are keenly aware of the status of *el indio*. As Mexican-Americans, their cultural heritage is further complicated when they come into contact with the Euro-American, for in the United States Chicanos are often the object of prejudice and racism, and each writer in his way developed a defense or means of emotional and psychological self-preservation. Rodriguez decides to embrace the dominant group and deny his ethnicity: "I am American" he asserts. Acosta attempts to circumvent the difficulties by adopting masks–self-protective disguises–which allow him temporary and partial escape. Ironically these

writers seem almost unaware of their inability to come to terms with their Mexican heritage. They each claim to accept themselves and find their identity in each of their first books, but in their second works they are still found struggling with the same concerns about their physical features, their place in the Anglo-American world, their relation to other Mexican Americans, and ultimately even their relationship with themselves. It is questionable whether they accepted themselves as they were at the time of their writing. It has now been twenty years since Rodriguez wrote his first book, and based on his subsequent writings, and on my interview with of him in 1999, I can conclude that Rodriguez has indeed changed; he is a much less controversial figure to the Mexican-American community.

Racism and prejudice are both leveled at minorities and used by minorities themselves, for too often cultural pride can manifest negative nationalistic overtones. There is a delicate balance between self-love and a sense of superiority. Daniela Gioseffi writes that,

> Ethnocentricism ...makes it easier to project evil onto scapegoated enemies in times of war. Prejudice and xenophobia...have been easily rallied into use by leaders for their own imperialist schemes. There is a deep need for humans...to bond together with those whom they feel are more like themselves, as *difference* constitutes a threat. Those people who look and talk and move and dress differently than "we" do can't be trusted...Their different ways threaten our ways and, in effect, tell us our ways are no good. (*On Prejudice* xix)

Acosta's work exhibits at least a partial search for a sense of belonging within the Chicano community after years of remaining apart, though ultimately he found that he *could* not belong. Increasingly in our culture there is a trend toward viewing individuals as citizens of the world rather than as members of a particular group, nation, or state. Again, according to Gioseffi,

> Since the turn of the century...scientists...have abandoned the useless classification of humankind into "Mongoloid, Negroid, Caucasoid,"...The word *race* need be used only to specify the human race...We are all inextricably mixed...[and this] has been going on since the very beginning of life on Earth. The human population everywhere is hybrid and becoming increasingly so. (xii)

Yet these concerns with race and with *mixture* are paramount in countries with diverse populations like Mexico, a country with few, if any, racially

pure subjects. And in our own country, Rodriguez and Acosta are both well aware that they are marked by indelible ethnicity in features and pigmentation.

When differences are perceived, hierarchies result. One group is privileged over another. Those deemed to belong to the lower orders can develop an inferiority complex. Historian Ralph Ginzburg concludes "...that the projection of self-hatred caused by guilt or feelings of inadequacy lies at the root of race hatred" (quoted in *On Prejudice*, xx). In other words, according to Ginzburg, those who lack a strong sense of self-esteem are those most likely to be prejudiced against others, a concept that may be supported by reading Acosta who ironically sprinkles his vocabulary with racial epithets.

In spite of progress, colonization is still occurring. How a subject becomes decolonized, is a question that Sidonie Smith attempts to answer in her essay, "The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities, Politics." Using Franz Fanon's work as a basis, she asserts that "All 'I's' are not equal. Nor are they conceptualized similarly" (186). The minority "I" and the majority "I" enjoy different positions within society. For Smith, and in regard to self-representation, "'I's' are consolidated, naturalized, centralized or marginalized through certain cultural practices that effectively 'regulate' the epistemological, ontological, and hermeneutical implications of autobiographical utterances" (186). Although she does not specify the "cultural practices" to which she refers, these practices include such things as the acculturation process and language acquisition. These seemingly innocent practices have a central effect on the development of self, an argument that Rodriguez has already made. "Imperial gazes" (flashes of Octavio Paz) reveal and relegate the minority "I" as "a locus of normative and exclusionary stabilizations of subjectivity that silence marginalized peoples, thereby occluding specific temporalities of identities, specific heterogeneous histories" (186). This rhetoric, though well taken, reflects the kinds of studies being conducted in the study of alterity, identity formation, and post-colonial populations. The subject of "self" and "other" has been much discussed and debated with each writer drawing slightly different conclusions and providing a slightly different perspective and focus. One reason this subject is so prevalent is that individuals are just that: unique and solitary beings, albeit often social ones as well. Consider the minority woman, for instance. One such might feel more oppressed

because of her gender while another might feel that it is her ethnicity that relegates her to the margins. One minority may feel that skin color is the central tenet of discrimination, while another feels that it is because of poverty or lack of education. Ultimately, we can draw no conclusions that are all-encompassing, though that need not deter us from attempting to understand the subtleties of being a minority in America.

In the case of both Acosta and Rodriguez, the "imperial gaze" has reduced them to posturing as something they feel society might esteem. In Acosta's case, he hopes to find sanction first as a lawyer then as a writer. Rodriguez seeks his acceptance as an intellectual, a writer, and as a non-minority, as he himself asserts. Both Acosta and Rodriguez reject inclusion among the minority populace; they both privilege individuality over a collective identity; they both ultimately reject their culture to one degree or another.

Smith notes that autobiographical writing can play a role in "emancipatory politics." Writing an autobiography can be liberating. In inscribing one's life, one can come to terms with the difficulties there inherent; one can work through the tough questions of identity and community and culture. One can define ones' self and present ones' self to the world as one wishes. Rodriguez writes: "In my own version of my life..." (208) implying of course that there might be differing versions. The presentation he gives–indeed the presentation anyone gives–is subjective. This anxiety about self-representation takes center stage in the works of these two writers. They are obsessively concerned with how they are perceived to such an extent that their disclosures are neither complete nor completely honest. In leaving behind his papers and personal effects–obsessively collected over the years–Acosta comments that he "... was going to make certain that [his] biographers had all the information they'd need to make a complete report" (*Autobiography* 49). As a distant contrast, when Thomas Hardy reached his latter years, he burned most of his papers and wrote his own "biography" so that others would not write about his humble background about which he felt shame. Hardy wanted to leave the official record; he wanted to preempt the biographers, and so for years his autobiography was known as "The Life of Thomas Hardy" by Florence Hardy, his wife.

Acosta and Rodriguez seem to come to little greater self-knowledge; instead, they prefer to obfuscate many aspects of their lives in order to

present themselves as they are not: in order to present themselves as they wish to be regarded. It is questionable whether they truly accept themselves and their cultural heritage. In other words they use their autobiographies to "stage identities" (to borrow two words from Smith who in turn has borrowed them from someone else). Or in more of Smith's words, autobiographies are "...always a gesture toward publicity, displaying before an impersonal public an individual's interpretation of experience" (191). A highly *subjective* interpretation, it might be added. Great possibilities exist for "*mis*-interpretation of experience" as we have seen. Nevertheless there is power in writing "I," in asserting one's self, in reclaiming one's life from the ravages of time that will no doubt come to all. Acosta seems more self-conscious about this. He records: "In a twenty-page opinion, 'Castro vs. Superior Court, 1970,' we make the law books. We have established a new precedent...So long as the Republic stands, defense lawyers will be quoting our case and I am assured of my place in legal history" (*Revolt* 181). Though his place in legal history may not be as prominent as he thought or hoped, his place in Chicano literary history is becoming increasingly assured.

The best approach to Acosta and Rodriguez is one that acknowledges their individuality as writers rather than as politicians. Both writers have been aptly viewed as contributors to particular ideologies, but no less central is their position as word-crafters, writers concerned with aesthetics. Very few critics have taken this latter approach. One or two exceptions have already been noted. As individuals, Acosta and Rodriguez both have been doubly marginalized: from the dominant culture and from the Mexican-American culture as well.

Juan Bruce-Novoa, one of the most prolific Chicano critics, takes a surprisingly liberal view toward both Acosta and Rodriguez. In the beginning of his career as a literary critic, Novoa wrote that he deplored "...the existence of any pre-established definition of ...art and its subtypes...I called for complete freedom to write about anything, in any way and in any language, without cultural, regional or political prerequisites. No restrictions from outside nor inside the Movement" ("Freedom of Expression" 13). While this view should stem merely from logic and common sense, it has not been widely applied to the work of Acosta and Rodriguez, particularly the latter. What happens when limitations are imposed? Are creativity and originality stifled? If some scholar had early-on delineated

the requirements for writing Chicano/a literature, this field would have long since died out. No individual or group of individuals can (or should) give such prescriptions without severe negative consequences.

In spite of this caveat, Novoa has noted that there were indeed tendencies to establish norms in the field. He writes that the possible choices for young Chicano/a writers were: "(1) to work within certain norms and be recognized as Chicano...(2) to work according to their own norms and try to somehow resist exclusion; (3) to dedicate themselves to art and forget external classifications" (14). While number three is clearly Novoa's preference, this view is not always shared by others, leading him to conclude that "Chicano literature is in danger of being handcuffed to superficial characteristics" (15). For a time there was something of an unwritten standard or formula for a successful piece of Chicano/a literature. The aspiring Chicano or Chicana writer should use: "...five or six *carnales*, a dozen *eses* and *batos*, a sprinkle of Spanish and a well placed '*chinga tu madre.*' Again, I do not deny the right of the author to use this or any language. What I attack is the need to utilize it to sell the work as Chicano" (16). Rodriguez himself was told by publishers to include more of the *dichos* of grandma. In other words to include more "local color," more of what the mainstream society would expect from this type of literature. These classifications and categories are not only limiting, but they take the position that all Chicano/as have undergone similar experiences, which presupposes that there is a monolithic Mexican-American culture.

Very few Chicano/a writers have joined Rodriguez on the periphery of the field. John Rechy's novels about the homosexual experience and Nash Candelaria's novels which disregard the Chicano experience are two notable exceptions. Increasingly there are others. Novoa argues that, "...instead of destroying Chicano literature, these works have enlarged its space, enriching it and forcing an acceptance of new possibilities of its character, simultaneously having the effect on the culture itself" ("*Les minorites en Amerique*" 88). Nevertheless, Novoa also notes in another essay that more "...print has been dedicated to the questionable effort to keep Richard Rodriguez out of the Chicano canon than in assuring a place for some deserving authors" ("Canonical and Non-Canonical" 144).

Although throughout the Chicano movement there has been a desire for community and coherence, a desire to work together to achieve goals and rights, a desire to develop (or regain) an almost communal society; this has

not been achieved, and, it may be argued, if community necessitates conformity and homogeneity, then this may not be so desirable. Acosta questions the "flimsy ethnic foundation" of the movement. In reference to this Novoa writes "...with the presence of Richard Rodriguez and Nash Candelaria we now have strong voices of opposition...but somehow they really represent portions of our community which...we must take into consideration. They are neither solitary nor eccentric voices, but representative of the conflictive plurality within ourselves" ("Surviving Our Decade" 130). Novoa believes that in order for Chicano literature to move toward what Hayden White called "diatactical discourse," it must loosen the boundaries of the canon. Novoa argues that Acosta was a challenge to the Chicano movement: "Certainly Oscar Zeta Acosta's satires were already practicing a severe debunking of the rhetorical positions, not only of mainstream society but of the Chicano Movement as well" (130). Acosta eventually made his way into the Chicano canon, but Rodriguez is presented in Chicano Studies courses as something of a "straw man," a whipping boy, something to laugh at, or argue against, because rather than embracing and working within the so-called movement, he stood on the outskirts, but dared to write about it.

Like Rodriguez, Acosta has questioned the ethnic basis of a healthy identity. Novoa writes that Acosta attacked the primacy of ethnic identity and that as a result he was, first,

> ...cut off from non-Chicanos by the separatist (read racist) restrictions placed on him by his fellow Chicanos–he is not allowed near a "Gabacha" who wants to congratulate him (230). Second, at the same time that he is forced into strictly Chicano relationships, the plot of the text culminates in a fratricidal court battle among Chicanos of different levels and persuasions.... ("Canonical and Non-Canonical" 138)

Ultimately Acosta is disenfranchised because of his negative portrayals of the Chicano movement, because he debunks the myth of unity within the movement. But Novoa further notes that there were significant "... ideological concerns which fragmented the community whenever the realities of political action demanded confrontation with the dominant society. Unity was approximated only during cultural celebrations..." (138). For Novoa, at least, "Acosta chose to plumb deeper than ethnicity" placing him in the company of Candelaria, Rechy, and Rodriguez.

In Bruce-Novoa's conclusion to *Retrospace*, a collection of essays on Chicano literary production, he returns to his first essay titled "Freedom of Expression and the Chicano Movement" to argue for,

> ...artistic and ideological freedom for writers and the tolerance of differences by readers and critics. I made a plea for allowing our literature to develop as the expression of the entire community, not just those who speak the style or the message of one or another interest group. Chicano literature is to be made, not prescribed. (174)

Novoa thinks that far too much "...censuring and excluding ha[s] been carried out by over-zealous, narrow-minded, misguided Chicanos themselves" (175). And among a group of individuals who call for an increasingly multi-cultural and diverse voice in literature, can we do more than allow Acosta and Rodriguez a voice, a place, finally, within the canon?

One of the results of the so-called multi-cultural (and civil rights) movement begun by Blacks is that more and more individuals are taking to exploring their own roots. One of the leading journals on minority literature, *MELUS*, often features articles addressing such literatures as those of Irish-Americans, Polish-Americans, or Italian-Americans: literatures not traditionally studied as the work of minorities. Unfortunately there has been a trend to disparage Euro-Americans, particularly males, and the inevitable has occurred, white males are now forming their own groups to resist oppression and marginalization. Can it be that someday the tide will be completely turned, when minorities will be the majority enjoying privileged status and Anglo-Americans will be the minority group suffering the prejudice previously leveled at their darker-skinned compatriots? If so, one oppressor will have been replaced by another, a dubious boon. Lauro Flores has noted that what was once the marginal discourse is now becoming dominant. Witness the popularity of things ethnic. An operetta about Frida opens on Broadway. Frida and the Virgin de Guadalupe are now fashionable ethnic icons. Clothing, food, films, music, and television programming related to the Mexican culture are becoming more common. Tom Cruise is dating Penelope Cruz. Even Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua–who were quadruply marginalized by their class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation–now enjoy the status of being widely published and anthologized, writers.

As other minorities follow suit, it is likely that they will initially choose

the genre of autobiography to give voice to their life history. From there it is hoped that they will branch out. But consider Maya Angelou who has continually chosen the genre of autobiography as her preferred method of writing. For minorities, the autobiographical genre can help in the search for identity and sanction. As individual minority literatures develop more fully, the traditional autobiographical impulses will continue to be addressed: the acquisition of an outlook, the story of a calling, the autobiography of a poet or artist, the autobiography of childhood, the search for truth, and of course, the autobiographical novel. As each new work is written and published our own culture will be enriched. As other individuals define themselves through the autobiographical mode, we can more precisely situate ourselves in relation to them. It remains to be seen whether the popularity of ethnic literature will endure, but if it does, autobiographical accounts will be at the forefront. As more works are written the discourse within this genre will continue to branch out, lending greater scope and variety, which we should welcome.

Acosta has contributed two colorful (if controversial) narratives which capture the spirit of the 60's and 70's counterculture. His carefully structured autobiographical works depict many concerns basic to a discussion of ethnic identity. He has dared to stand naked in front of his audience, open to our critical stare, exposing his insecurities, weaknesses and vanities simultaneously. He very nearly coined a new term for a group of disenfranchised people: *brown buffaloes*, although his other term, *cockroach people*, was understandably a little less popular. He lived hard and fast, and as quickly as he entered the stage, he disappeared. This vanishing act seems almost appropriate, for though legally declared dead, there has been no funeral, no wake, no obituary. The Buffalo Z. Brown, Zeta, Oscar Acosta will live on in his quixotic works.

Richard Rodriguez's autobiographical essays have been stirring up even more controversy than Acosta's works. Rodriguez has dared to speak out critically of programs intended to help minority students: programs as revered by Chicanos as *mother* and *Virgin de Guadalupe*. Yet Rodriguez can be credited with bringing this debate to a national level. More importantly, however, his eloquent voice has forced others to listen, whether in print, on the radio, or on national television. And although he is not a role-model nor the average case-study, he is also not an anomaly; he is not one isolated example. His melancholic observations are far too common:

minorities and immigrants can be, are often, irretrievably changed by education and unmercifully separated from parents and cultures. Assimilation can occur even against one's will. Contrary to what a few critics have written, Rodriguez has not attempted to set himself up as the model, as the average Mexican minority. Instead he has continually asserted that he speaks for himself only, for he is a solitary individual.

Pairing Acosta and Rodriguez is fruitful because they have authored two books and various articles giving us a broader range for interpreting their work. Each of these writers is much concerned with identity, with writing, with their culture, and with the dominant group. They both feel keenly what it is to be on the periphery, to be something of an outcast. Acosta and Rodriguez in their own peculiar ways break new ground in Chicano letters by adding another dimension to the field. For this reason, Acosta's and Rodriguez's additions to Chicano literature must not be minimized, for in spite of their peculiar contributions, the controversy and debate they have incited will ultimately have positive effects by widening the space of Chicano literature. What is needed then, is a reevaluation, a reconciliation, a fuller examination of their work and perhaps even a greater acceptance of them. No, Acosta and Rodriguez do not speak for the majority of Hispanics in America, nor does any other single writer. They remain two controversial extremes, but they do speak out, and their voices demand our attention above the din.

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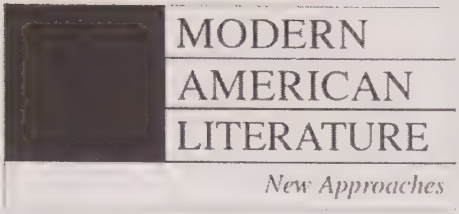

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Chicano Controversy takes a unique approach to two colorful and controversial Chicano writers: Oscar Acosta and Richard Rodriguez. Paul Guajardo argues that Acosta's involvement with the Chicano movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was somewhat opportunistic as Acosta was always uneasy about his identity and ethnicity. Conversely, Guajardo argues that Richard Rodriguez—who also problematizes notions of ethnicity—requires re-evaluation and full inclusion into the broadening canon of Chicano literature.

Paul Guajardo received his Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Washington, Seattle. He currently teaches at the University of Houston, Texas.

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